these masks we wear

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/35171863.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Underage Sex

Categories:
M/M, F/M

Fandom:
Supernatural

Relationships:
Castiel/Dean Winchester, Lee Webb/Dean Winchester, Dean Winchester/Other(s)

Characters:
Dean Winchester, Castiel (Supernatural), Sam Winchester, Mary Winchester, Jack Kline, Charlie Bradbury, John Winchester

Additional Tags:
Character Study, Gay Dean Winchester, Self-Worth Issues, dean's sad internal monologue over 30+ years, the long hard road to self-acceptance, Coming Out, suicidal ideation (events of 13x05), mentions of:, Dean/Lisa - Freeform, Dean/Cassie - Freeform, dean/rhonda - Freeform, Dean/OMCs - Freeform, dean's canon m/f relationships treated with respect, extremely brief reference to sex work, non-explicit sexual encounters between consenting 17 year olds, Internalised Homophobia (mild), homophobia (no slurs or hate crimes), Happy Ending, Found Family, Canon Compliant, through 13x06ish, Dean/Cas Big Bang (Supernatural), Dean/Cas Big Bang 2021 (Supernatural)

Language:
English

Collections:
DCBB 2021

Stats:
Published: 2021-11-17 Words: 24,202 Chapters: 3/3

these masks we wear

by deansnuggles

Summary

These are the things you hide, when you're John Winchester's oldest son:
A feather Sammy found and gave you.
A piece of satin you cut from a nightgown you swiped from the thrift store. You like to keep it in your pocket and rub it between your fingers.
A romance novel left behind in a motel. You tape the cover of a Stephen King novel on the front.
A picture of Robert Plant hidden under the fabric on the bottom of your toiletry bag.
A cassette of Queen, a cassette of The Beatles.
You like to draw. Knights and dragons and cowboys. A mockingbird.
A lily. A boy in your class.
You rip that one up and burn it.

We follow Dean through important times in his life as he slowly learns to accept who he is and figures out what a happy ending means for him.

Notes

Story and artwork created for the Dean/Castiel Big Bang 2021

A huge thank you to my artist, Scarlett Dixon, for the absolutely stunning artwork in this story. Please check out her masterpost to see it all in one place. I truly hit the jackpot and could not have asked for a better partner! https://scarlettmichkat.tumblr.com/post/668109020898410496

Also thank you to my beta and dear friend Bexy for the hard work and encouragement. Any remaining mistakes are mine!

Thank you to Bexy and Michelle for keeping me sane over the last two years. Love you both SO much.

And thank you to all the Gay Dean Truthers and Gay Dean Supporters, past and future... without you guys I never would have had the courage to write this, let alone post it. I love all 12 of you. ;-)

And finally, thank you, readers, for giving this a chance. <3

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Part 1

[image]

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When Dean Winchester is four years old, he wants to be a dancer.

A month before his fourth birthday, his mom takes him to see The Nutcracker ballet. The dancers are beautiful and strong and Dean is enraptured by them, their spins and jumps and outfits. He spends the next year leaping and twirling, telling his dad he's fighting pirates or cowboys or space aliens, because even at four he knows there are some things you don't tell John Winchester.

By the end of the year, he vows instead to be a fireman.

He holds onto that dream until he's nine and a shtriga almost gets Sammy. His fault. He decides then that there are plenty of firefighters; saving kids from monsters will be his calling. That's what will make Dad proud.

Sometimes he lets himself dream of a day when they've finally found Mom's killer, when the monsters have all been scared off and he can have a happily ever after. For a while he dreams of being a rockstar, or a mechanic when he's in a more practical mood. He dreams of a
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house like the one they had—he can still see it when he closes his eyes, the green siding and yellow door—but with more space, more land. All he's known are cramped and dirty motel rooms, never quiet, never private. He could have a house where you have to walk a bit to see your neighbors.

He could have a dog, maybe. Sammy likes dogs. He'd have a big garage for his cars. Band and movie posters on the walls. A big refrigerator full of food. He'd have kids, probably, take care of them like he takes care of Sammy. Maybe Sammy can buy the house next door.

He thinks that he'll need to have a wife, too. That's the goal, right, what they're fighting for, the prize at the end of the battle—a wife, a house, some kids. Back to normal. But while he can clearly see the house and the land and the dog and even the kids, the image of the wife is always undefined.

1990

The first time Dean has a crush on a boy he's eleven years old.

The school year has just started. It's his first year of middle school, the first day of the first year of being in a different school from Sam. He hasn't hit a growth spurt in a while, resulting in him being one of the smallest boys in the school. He hates it.

He spends all day counting the minutes til the bell rings. Not making eye contact, not drawing attention to himself. Most of the other kids know each other, of course; he's used to that. Used to being the new kid, the outsider, the weirdo. It doesn't bother him, usually—what would he even talk to them about? He can't talk about his life, his family, where he came from or where he's going. If he does, he gets either pity or disgust. It's better to not even try.

This time, though. This time it's harder. He misses Sam. He misses the easy structure of elementary school, each new classroom basically the same as the last, on and on from one side of the country to the other. He misses a home he barely remembers and longs to connect with someone—anyone—besides the baby brother he's raising and the father who barely speaks to them.

Sam's school is just on the other side of the parking lot, and Dean's

tasked with waiting outside for him every day to walk back to the motel. It's one of those towns where everything is close enough that John doesn't need to drive them, which means they rarely see him.

Only a week into the school year John forgets to leave them cash for lunch. Dean had packed Sam's bag with a peanut butter sandwich and their last slightly bruised apple. For himself, he'd had only the bread heel to fold in half with peanut butter, and some beef jerky he'd had at the bottom of his duffel. Sitting outside waiting for Sam's class to let out, his stomach cramping from hunger—he'd given Sam the last of the cereal that morning, too—he digs through his backpack for the fourth time, looking for any forgotten snacks even though he knows there aren't any.

Footsteps approach, too early to be Sam's, and Dean stiffens. He hasn't had a run in with any of the older kids yet, but he knows from experience that his ill-fitting thrift store clothes are a beacon for teasing and bullies. He looks up, chin raised, ready to give as good as he gets.

But instead of a group looking for trouble, it's just a boy, probably a grade above Dean, with dark hair and blue eyes and a kind but nervous smile.

"Hey."

"Hey." Dean says hesitantly.

"I'm Sean."

Dean just looks at him.

"I, um. I see you and your brother? Walking down Gaver Street most days. I gotta walk home too."

Dean's wary until Sean plops down in front of him and pulls out his lunchbox. He's got a box of raisins, pretzel sticks, and the leftover half of a big cheese sandwich. Dean's stomach rumbles loud enough to hear.

"My ma always packs too much. She feels bad when she has long shifts. She's a nurse at the hospital. She saves people's lives." He pushes over the opened lunchbox. "Here, take whatever, I don't mind sharing. It's boring walking home every day."

"I'm waiting for my brother. He's growing like a weed, he'll be

hungrier than me. You can share with him."

"Don't be stupid. Here—take half, and your brother can have the other half. I've got more at home, doesn't bother me any."

They stay in that school for several months longer than usual. It's in a central location, right off the highway, so John can easily get to jobs and back. The hotel is close to the school with a little convenience store in between to pick up bread and peanut butter and cereal and macaroni.

Sean walks them to the hotel every day before veering off to head towards his own house. He's a latchkey kid, since his mom's a nurse and his dad bugged out when he was seven. Dean wonders what it would be like, if Dad and Mom had switched places… then hates himself for wondering.

Every time Sean comes around the corner of the school, grinning, Dean feels it in his stomach. Falling. Flying. Something he's never felt. He doesn't know what it is, but knows he wants more of it. More of Sean.

On days when Sean's mom has a shift, he hangs out in the hotel room with them—teaches Dean how to play blackjack, helps Sammy with his homework, watches grainy westerns on the rabbit ear television. Sean pulls out his sketchbook and shows them how to draw horses. Sometimes he brings over old comics, which Dean loves. John would never waste money on something so frivolous, and if he caught Dean stealing… well. Dean doesn't get caught stealing.

When John's home, Sean doesn't come in. Dean's not sure why he wants so badly to keep John away, but he does. There's never been a rule about bringing kids over—Dean's never asked, so John's never said. But somehow he knows in the pit of his stomach that John wouldn't let Sean come over any more if he knew. Sam keeps quiet too, but Sam doesn't talk to John much, anyway.

It's the first big secret Dean has ever kept from his father.

They finally leave town just before winter break. When John tells them to pack up their stuff, Dean nods and bites his lip until it bleeds. In the shower that night, he cries for the first time in five years.

1993

The first time he dreams about a boy he's fourteen. He washes his shorts in the sink of the hotel bathroom and tries to hold back tears.

He doesn't get much time to himself, and when he does he doesn't really think about… anything, really. He swipes some skin mags and hides them in a rip between the lining in his duffel. They're… nice. The women are pretty, pleasing to look at. He knows what he's supposed to be feeling, and after a while he does, a little, with the anticipation of it. He just needs practice, probably. He's a late bloomer, or something. And dreams are just dreams.

John has started hinting about girls for the last year. Dean understands, intellectually, what is expected of him, enough that he's figured out how to play along. Smile at your waitress, call her sweetheart, comment on her when she walks away. Point out models on billboards and magazine covers. Laugh along and look sufficiently impressed at other men's overblown stories of their exploits. He's not confident enough to make stories of his own. Not yet. But he always goes along with the implication. To deny it would be opening up to ridicule and comments on his preferences that leave him lying awake at night in fear. He learned that the hard way.

They don't spend much time around other people anyway, but John does have a small network of hunters he meets up with for intel or backup. He keeps them away from Sam entirely, but starts bringing Dean along to the seedy taverns they frequent. Places that don't give a shit if you roll in with half an arsenal on you, and turn a blind eye when you order an extra beer for the fourteen year old who could still pass for twelve.

These people are dangerous. They're all dangerous, Dean knows—he's been shooting since he was six, and has known exactly where to cut to kill versus disable an attacker for almost as long—but these men are killers. They don't separate the world into *people* versus *monsters* . They only see *us* versus *them* , where *they* could be anyone from a vampire to a rival hunter to, well. They have plenty of stories of what they would do to people like… to people who are different.

He learns to be very, very careful, and he plays the game.

The only exceptions have been Pastor Jim and Bobby Singer. They both seem to be in the business of helping people rather than just killing things. It's always a relief when John takes them to stay with Jim or Bobby rather than leaving them to fend for themselves. They're guaranteed three meals a day, and having another hunter and a

fortified location means Dean can actually sleep. He doesn't always, his body too used to snapping awake at the slightest sound, but he at least doesn't feel the need to check the locks and the wards and the salt-lines several times a night like he does when they're alone.

They haven't been to Bobby's in a while. John had caught them at the park instead of Bobby's backyard shooting range one too many times, which led to a screaming match with Bobby about coddling the boys and turning them soft. John hasn't said a word about Bobby since.

1995

It's bad enough when John leaves. It's ten times worse when he sends Dean away. He's done it a few times and called it "survival training," sending Dean off into the woods with a random assortment of supplies and telling him to meet him somewhere in a day or three. Once, when Dean got to the rendezvous on day three, there was a note saying John would be back in two more days, and that Dean needed to be resourceful and fend for himself. He ended up caught in a thunderstorm before finding shelter, soaked and shivering until daybreak.

This time John didn't even make the effort to send Dean away; he let the cops do it for him. Now Dean's stuck here, no family, no job, nothing but chores and homework and a group of boys who are all damaged and lonely and keeping to themselves. But Dean finds himself relaxing for the first time in over a decade, opening up a bit to Sunny, getting passing grades more often than not. He joins the wrestling team. He's learning guitar. He's becoming someone else, or maybe just becoming more himself.

Robin is nice. Dean hasn't had many friends, especially not in high school where cliques form before anyone even steps foot into class. He knows he's awkward; he has weird interests, he talks too fast and makes too many wisecracks, has trouble keeping his hands still. Robin at least doesn't seem to mind, maybe even finds it endearing.

So it happens that the first time he kisses a girl he's sixteen—or, more accurately, a girl kisses him. It's… nice. To feel wanted. To be close to someone. To hug and hold hands and just be. The kissing is nice too. It's not something he's thought much about, hasn't really had occasion other than a vague wistfulness at the thought someone might hold

him, touch him softly and kindly. He doesn't really *look* at girls the way he knows the other boys his age do. He hears them talking, even participates occasionally when he makes inroads with a particular group at one of their many schools. Like with the hunters, he's learned what you *say* , what you *do* , *how* to look and talk. He's good at it, at being this person. He's getting better at convincing the other boys, better at convincing John. He's figured it's like riding a bike—with enough practice, it will come naturally, and he'll learn to want it the same as they did.

They don't go any farther than kissing, him and Robin, and Dean never feels that swooping-falling-flying in his stomach. If he'd stayed, if they'd had that dance… he's sure it would have happened.

1996

The following winter he meets Nate. Dad's gone again, and he leaves Dean in charge with strict instructions to "don't fuck it up this time, for God's sake." The high school gets out a good ninety minutes before Sam's school—and that's when Dean doesn't skip—so he usually swipes a car magazine from one of the convenience stores or a book from the library to kill time. Nate offers him smokes, a rare indulgence. They're expensive and hard to steal. Nate takes them from his old man when he can.

The weeks go by and John doesn't come back, and doesn't come back, and doesn't come back. He calls, every week or two (or three…), says he's found another job, they can do without him a little longer, right? (Yes sir, of course sir.) You've got that job at the junkyard still, you'll be alright. (Dean didn't, but he did have a fake ID now and could make more hustling pool for a few hours than a whole week at the yard.) Take care of Sammy. (Take care of Sammy. Take care of Sammy.)

It's cold, and getting colder. Dean and Nate stay warm in the library most afternoons until they get chased out, then smoke behind an abandoned gas station. They talk cars and bad movies, try to one-up each other with stories about their worst gas station meals or shitty roach infested motel rooms. Dean finds himself counting the hours til their meetup time every day with an excited twist in his stomach. It's been a long time since he had someone to talk to.

It's a Tuesday, and sunny enough to break through the winter chill.

They're messing around, having exhausted their cigarette and magazine supply. Dean nabs Nate's ballcap and takes off, until Nate grabs him and they tussle over it and Nate pins him to the wall. Their eyes meet, and the air changes instantly. His body prickles, hot, his eyes widen. He licks his lips and sees Nate's eyes track the movement. When those eyes flick back up to his own, Dean has just a moment to notice the blown pupils before Nate's lips are on his. And—oh. There. That's what was missing. Whatever spark, whatever secret alchemy hadn't come together with Robin, it's here now. They kiss sloppy, frantic.

Dean pulls back just enough to speak, still clinging to Nate's sweatshirt. "We shouldn't."

"Why the fuck not? Feels good, yeah?"

"Yeah, but… I'm not a… I'm not…" He can't bring himself to say it, can't speak it aloud even in denial for fear it will take hold.

"So? Who cares what you are. You see anyone else here?"

Dean's eyes dart around. "N-no."

"Just us. You want it, I want it. Nobody's gotta know. You want it, right?"

Dean nods quickly, not really knowing what *it* is on the table, but knowing whatever it is, whatever *this* is, he's not going to be able to say no. Doesn't want to say no. This pull in his stomach, in his chest, is exhilarating and terrifying and he needs to see what's on the other side.

They just make out, for now. Dean is equal parts disappointed and relieved when it's time to go get Sam. He wanted more, of course he did, he's seventeen, but… this is new and so, so dangerous.

The next time Dean sees him after school (a few days later—Nate skips a lot, doesn't talk about it), they dance around each other a bit. They take a walk to their regular smoking spot. Nate is rambling about something when Dean clears his throat, interrupting. "What we did. Last time. Have you ever, um. Done that? Before?"

Nate taps his cigarette ash onto the ground, shrugs. "Few times, maybe. Yeah. You?"

"Only with a girl."

“Hmm. Never done it with a girl.”

“What, never? Why not?”

“Dunno. Don’t want to, I guess.”

Dean blinks at him. That he can just say that, so casually.

Nate looks over at him, raises an eyebrow. “Did you like it?”

“What—the girl? Yeah, I guess.”

“Not the girl.”

“Oh.” He feels like he’s on the edge of something, teetering. He can say no, turn around, climb back to safety. He should. But Dean’s been carrying the sense-memory of that kiss with him for three days, and with Nate this close again it’s magnetic. “I… yeah. Yeah I did.”

Nate grins, stomps out his cigarette, and pulls him in by the back of his neck. Dean falls into him, and off the edge.

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It’s been ten weeks since they’ve seen John, and Dean gets sloppy. He starts having Nate over to the motel before Sammy gets home. Sam’s got math club, so he uses the excuse that it’s February and too cold to wait outside for two hours. It’s a fifteen minute walk to the hotel, so they have enough time to themselves. It’s not dating, and it’s not love, but it’s… something. Something new. When Dean first invites him in, they dance around each other for a while, neither knowing how to navigate this new freedom, this heady privacy.

That first afternoon, they sit on separate beds and watch sitcom reruns. The second day, Sam had been running late in the morning and left the contents of his duffle spread all over his bed on the way out, so they squeeze together on Dean’s, shoulders and thighs burning in a long line where they touch. Dean can feel the air crackling with it; a little push is all it would take to catch fire. But neither of them moves, and they leave it again with a nervous chuckle and a see-you-tomorrow.

The next day they don’t even make it to the bed. The moment the latch clicks Nate is on him, shoving him up against the door. They kiss hot and rough, and both seem to remember at the same moment that they aren’t hiding behind the drug store or the school dumpster or
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under the bleachers. Making out turns to grinding, turns to… well. They're seventeen and have only ever come at their own hand. They don't get further than grinding, that first time. They wash their shorts one at a time in the bathroom shower, and Dean gives him a plastic grocery bag for the walk home.

They experiment together for the next week. They make it to hands the next time, just barely. Then to various states of undress before figuring out that while hands on each other feels much better than dry humping, moving together with nothing in the way is far superior.

It all comes crashing down a few days later when John comes home unexpectedly. Thank God— *thank fucking God* —Dean has the only key, and they'd finished and showered and were laying sated but dressed watching bad daytime television waiting til it was time to get Sam.

He doesn't know—he c *an't* know—but Dean feels it in his gut, how close it was. The flicker of suspicion in John's eye, the blush Dean has never been able to hold back shining like a beacon of guilt. Nate, having his own angry drunk for a father, knows how to lower his eyes and yes-sir-no-sir-thank-you-sir his way out the door.

They leave the next day. Dean doesn't say goodbye.

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John says nothing for 3 days, til Dean has almost begun thinking he was out of the woods. They are driving somewhere past Omaha, Sam asleep in the back, when John finally says something.

"I don't like you having kids over when I'm gone. It's not safe for Sam. He could have been trying to steal from you, trying to get your guard down. Hell, he could have been a monster."

"He wasn't—I know how to test for monsters, Dad." That's why John had given him his mom's silver ring; Dean liked to think of it as her watching over him, protecting him even though she was gone. He turns it round and round on his finger.

John shoots him a glare, and Dean deflates. "Don't talk back to me."

"Yes sir."

John's quiet for a long moment. "Look. I know I put a lot on you, having you take care of Sammy, cook for him, deal with his teachers,
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all that. So maybe that's on me. You're just… confused, is all. But you need to—you need to get it together, Dean. When that guy at the group home, what's-his-name, told me you wanted to go to prom with that girl, I thought, 'Finally.' But then you go and—" He lets out a frustrated noise. "Here's the bottom line, boy. You need to blow off some steam, that's fine, that's natural. You go find yourself a nice girl, or hell, a not-so-nice girl, and you get it out of your system, okay? As long as it doesn't get in the way of you taking care of Sammy, as long as you don't get distracted, you go find as many girls as you need to. Just don't get attached. And for god's sake, wear a rubber."

"God, Dad! I know, okay! Jesus."

"But I never, *ever* , want to catch you with a boy in our room again. I don't care what your story is, I don't care about your excuses. If I catch you with a boy again I'm throwing you out on your ass for good. You understand?"

Dean doesn't respond, can't respond. Knows silence will only make it worse, but the words won't come out. He nods, knowing it won't be enough.

"I said. Do you understand."

"Y-y-yessir."

"No son of mine… you hear me? No son of mine…"

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From that moment, he starts building up his walls brick by brick, cocky smile by cocky smile. Learns to flirt, learns to *look* , to wink and smirk and project that persona of the man his father wants him to be until his true self is under enough lockdown it would take a nuclear bomb to reach.

(He'll meet that nuclear bomb in a drafty barn when he's 29.)

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As soon as Nate's behind him, Dean starts rewriting it in his head. It wasn't that great, actually. It was just instinct. Just a couple horny teenagers helping each other out. Of course it felt good, someone else touching you. He'd just gotten… confused with it. His brain short circuited a bit.

He spends the next two years chasing that feeling with every girl who's receptive. He jerks off to skin mags and fuzzy scrambled pay per view porn. He tells himself he just needs to train his brain, get it on track. It's always been quick and perfunctory, jerking off; it's had to be, living in tiny hotels with a single bathroom and no other privacy. He usually doesn't let himself think of anything really—just formless, faceless hands and mouths. Thinking about women doesn't usually make him come any faster, but he's not sure why. Too much focusing on the details, maybe. If, sometimes, his mind drifts to those days in Omaha, or actors and musicians, that's fine. Neurons fire weirdly when close to orgasm, is all.

The first time he sleeps with a girl, it's… unremarkable. He figures, just like the rest of it, you probably need practice—so he does. It's nice, usually. Sometimes even fun. He figures out how to make it good for them, make them feel good, get them so out of their minds with pleasure that they aren't paying attention to him at all. Oftentimes he can get away with not even fucking them.

1998

When he's nineteen, he meets Rhonda. She's older, experienced. She sees right through him, past the posturing and bluster to what he really needs. The thrill of the silk, pink against his thighs, foreign and forbidden and perfect. She makes him try them on, she makes him do… a lot of things. Well. *Make* is a strong word for something he is absolutely a willing participant in, under a thin layer of denial and bluster. She spreads him out and turns on a porno—a threesome, two men and a woman—then tells him to watch and jerk himself off. He comes harder than he has in his life. Later, he tells himself it was because of Rhonda, of course. Rhonda, hot and commanding, fucking herself with a toy watching him get off. But the truth is he barely saw her.

2001

Sam leaves.

He should have seen it coming. He did see it coming, but had convinced himself it wouldn't actually happen. It was all just bluster, threats, pushing back against John. Normal teenage rebellion. It'll

blow over. Everything will go back to normal. All they have is each other, and none of them would jeopardize that. Sam wouldn't jeopardize that.

Naive. Idiot. If he'd known, if he'd opened his eyes just once and seen the danger he could have stopped it. He knows he could have. If he'd just had more time, time to prepare, time to talk Sammy down off the ledge. Remind him what was important. Maybe if he'd put himself in front of John more, kept the focus off Sam's moodiness these last few months, he could have kept John from pushing and pushing and pushing til something broke.

But he didn't. And Sam's gone. And John's gone. And he's all alone and it's no one's fault but his.

He can't be inside his own head right now, so he ends up at a dive bar to get blackout drunk. He's got an itch beneath his skin that can only be satisfied by a fight or a fuck, and he doesnt have the energy for the latter.

It's been 5 years since Nate, and he's convinced himself it was a fluke, what they had, what they did. Women are fine—women are great. They just… take a bit more work, is all. That makes sense, right, since who would know their way around a dick better than someone who has their own? And really it wasn't actually that good, you just always look back at your first time with rose colored glasses. Plenty of women had been better than that teenage fumbling, plenty. They had to have been. And hey, Rhonda had certainly been better, right? And if he still… noticed men, that was just a… casual appreciation.

Of course, just his luck there's no one paying any interest to the pool table. Hustling is a surefire way to get in a brawl and take his mind off things with some adrenaline and pain, or if not, to at least leave with enough cash to keep drinking til sunrise and get him through to the next town. No, this worthless joint only has old drunks and a group of women who looked him up and down when he walked in but dismissed him as either too young or not worth splitting from their group for. He tries not to be too relieved.

There's one man, though, who has a sharp look about him that puts Dean's hackles up. Not dangerous, he doesn't think—and he's got good instincts for real danger—but too interested, too aware. Could be looking for a fight, or a mark. Regardless, he's not going to fall for a hustle. Dean keeps one eye on him though, as the only potential threat in the building.

Eventually Dean runs out of cash, still without anyone around to hustle. As he pays his tab and makes his way to the door, he notices the man he'd had his eye on get up to follow. He does it casually, with a slow swagger, rolling up the sleeves of his work shirt. He's seemingly completely uninterested in Dean. But Dean's not fooled.

Dean leaves the bar and makes his way around back, playing up a drunken shuffle while his hands clench and unclench at his sides, adrenaline pushing back the alcohol haze. He stops around the corner, patting down his pockets as if looking for a phone or a smoke. He's got a gun, of course, but he palms a small silver knife in case this guy has his eye on more than Dean's wallet.

Dean feels more than hears the man come around the corner behind him, and he spins and grabs him, pushing him up against the concrete wall with the knife pressed against his throat. It's not burning, so at least this should be over quickly.

"What the fuck do you want?" he snarls.

The man lifts his hands palms out, his body loose and relaxed. "Hey kid, relax. I'm not after your cash—you're out anyway."

"Then why are you following me?"

"Well, I'm not so sure I wanna tell you with a knife on my throat. Check my pockets if you want, I don't got any weapons."

Dean checks him over while the man smirks down at him. It's not an unfriendly thing, but it makes Dean's skin itch.

Satisfied there's no weapons—none big enough to pose a threat at least—Dean backs off and pockets his knife. The man brushes himself off, fixes his collar.

"Now you wanna tell me why you tailed me down a dark alley?"

The man looks him over for a long moment, then seems to reach a decision. "Look, I'm usually pretty good at this, been around the block enough times. Been a long time since I clocked someone wrong. Don't think I did here either. But I'm also not lookin' to get knifed so… maybe we just go our separate ways and put all this behind us, yeah?"

Dean shakes his head, something deep in his gut pulling at him to get an answer. "Look buddy, if you're not looking for a fight then I ain't giving you one. I don't go around knifing people for no reason."

He lifts his eyebrows. “And what if there is a reason?”

He shrugs. “Guess we’ll find out, but unless you come at me with something more than words we’re not gonna have a problem.”

The man lets out a sigh. “Alright, look. You kept giving me looks in there, so. I kept giving looks back. Then you turned back to look when you left so I figured… well. That usually means come on along and have some fun, you know?”

“Some… fun.”

“Yeah! C’mon kid, don’t make me spell it out. If you wanna be on your way, go right ahead.”

“I’m not. I’m not… gay.” He swallows, his heart pounding its way up his throat.

“Course not. Me neither. Don’t gotta be to make each other feel good, yeah?” Dean sucks in a breath. It’s too close to what Nate had said. “But if you don’t wanna…”

Dean shakes his head.

“Alright then.” He turns to leave.

“Wait.”

He turns back, raises an eyebrow.

“Maybe I, um. What—what exactly is on the table, here?”

He shrugs. “Hands, mouths, whatever.”

He should walk away right now. He should punch the guy in the jaw for even suggesting it. He should walk back into the bar, pick up the first willing woman he finds, and get out of his head by giving her everything he’s got.

Just considering it leaves him exhausted.

He’s so goddamn *tired* . Tired of fighting with Sam, tired of playing peacemaker, tired of hotel rooms with shit water pressure and stale gas station coffee. Tired of not knowing when John’s showing up, *if* he’s showing up. Tired of having not a single soul on the planet he can turn to.

Tired of hiding. Tired of faking. Tired of denial.

Tired of not having anything—not one goddamn thing—that he *wants* .

Dean nods down at his shoes. “Okay. Okay. So how do we—”

The man kisses him hard, but not as rough as Dean would have expected. He holds onto Dean’s hips loosely, doesn’t box him in, keeps his own back against the wall—knows Dean’s a flight risk, most likely.

It’s good, as far as these things go. There’s probably only so good a quick fuck in an alley can be, but Dean doesn’t have much for comparison. And it’s different than last time, different with a man instead of a boy on the edge of manhood. The feel of a man’s stubble against Dean’s jaw, his neck. His big, calloused hands, broad shoulders. The man takes them both in hand, and Dean’s just along for the ride.

When they put themselves back together after, the man gives Dean a sideways look. “You be careful out there now, y’hear?”

Dean nods, keeps his head down as he walks back to the car. He wants to say something. Thank you, or… or something.

He doesn’t.

2002

After the alley, it’s harder to deny that something about that night, and about Nate, was so *very* different than it ever is with women.

But if there’s one thing Dean excels at, it’s self-denial.

He throws himself back into women for a while, tries to recreate some of what worked with the men. Fear of getting caught or doing something forbidden, maybe getting pushed around a bit. It helps—it’s not *right* , but it helps.

Lisa is a particularly memorable weekend. She’s confident and knows exactly what she wants, and he doesn’t hesitate to give it to her. He’s not one to brag—well, okay, maybe he is, but he thinks he’s earned it. One good thing about keeping the focus off yourself is you never get

any complaints.

2003

Sam's been gone for a year and a half when Dean meets Lee. Dean and John are working a particularly nasty salt-and-burn when they run into him. Normally John is suspicious and antagonistic towards hunters he doesn't know - and, alright, most of the ones he does too - but Lee shows up at the exact right moment to give them some much needed backup, and kicks enough ass that even John is begrudgingly impressed.

They finish replacing the grave dirt and exchange handshakes. "Y'all ever need a third, you can give me a call."

"Actually—" John's eyes flick over to Dean and back "—actually I was thinking of splitting up for a bit. Cover more ground. Got cases popping up in a couple states at the moment. Think you two can handle a few?"

Dean doesn't know if this is a test, or if John just wants to dump him at the first opportunity, but the prospect of hunting with someone who isn't his father, someone his own age he can maybe chill out around, is certainly appealing. He tells himself it's not at all about Lee being easy on the eyes.

As much as Dean likes to say he's a loose canon, he's methodical where it counts. A lifetime following militaristic rules with no room for error didn't allow for anything less. Lee, on the other hand, embodies the complete opposite. He drinks hard, fucks indiscriminately, shoots first and asks questions never. Just being around him is a sort of high, and that's apart from the actual highs from Lee's vast stash.

They get into a pattern of finishing a hunt, getting drunk, finding a pair of women who are on a similar quest, and going back to their motel to get high and fuck. It works for Dean— *really* works for him— and he *really* doesn't want to examine why. Why having more people in the room makes it easier, why having *Lee* in the room makes it easier. Especially once the women they bring back want to do more than just switch partners. Some of them want to share.

When Lee bags a trio—they say they're triplets, Dean's skeptical—he

gets a room with a single, and any pretense Dean was still clinging to disappears in the mass of bodies and sensation. With his mouth on Lee's cock, and one of the girls on his own, he doesn't even have to close his eyes to stay hard. He can just look up instead of down.

After that they don't pretend anymore. They still pick up women, sometimes. On one memorable occasion, another man. But more and more often they head back alone, or skip the bar entirely. Sometimes they even skip the room.

They don't talk about it. They aren't *dating* . They're just releasing the tension of a dangerous and stressful job. Hunters live fast and die young, Lee says. Might as well make the best of it. It's not like there are any feelings involved.

There aren't.

There aren't.

John calls to check in from time to time, but seems to prefer being on his own and Dean, for once, is happy with that arrangement. He starts letting other things out, piece by piece. He pierces an ear. Lee convinces him to. He grows his hair out a bit. He has more downtime —Lee likes to stick to Texas, dips across the border only occasionally. He reads more.

It all comes crashing down just as quickly as it started. John wants Dean to meet him on the other side of the country, hit all the hunts in the north-east for a while. Lee doesn't want to come. He likes it here, Texas is a big place, there's plenty of hunts within a few hours drive.

"You don't have to go back, you know. You could stick around. We've got a good thing going here, yeah? You're not a kid anymore, Dean— you don't have to come running just 'cause daddy calls."

"Yeah… yeah I do."

Lee shrugs, gives him a back slapping hug, says see you around then. Give me a ring next time you're in Texas. Dean says he will.

He won't.

He was stupid to think Lee would want to come, would want to hang around Dean's hardass father just for Dean's sake. Would want to sneak around and maybe make something of this, in the empty places between hunts, hiding from John's ever-watchful eye. He realizes, as

he drives away, that he's just made a choice, one of those significant forks in the road that define a life. Down one road, a life, in some form, with a friend he might have grown to love. A more stable, authentic life. But a life completely cut off. John could never know, he'd have to cut him out entirely. He'd have to do what Sam did, only college was respectable and Dean - wasn't.

And down the other, hunting with John Winchester til the day one of them died, stomping down everything that had started, however hesitantly, to peek up after years of being buried.

He chooses.

So it goes.

It didn't mean anything, he tells himself. Sometimes you just want something different. The thrill is in the change, that it's forbidden, that they could get caught. The rebellion of it. It wasn't *better* , it *wasn't* , it was just. Easier.

And it wasn't love, not really. Probably not, anyway.

2004

When he meets Cassie—sassy, take no bullshit, grab life by the horns Cassie—it's so easy to let himself get swept up in her. She knows what she wants, and she wants him. You don't just say no to that. So he doesn't.

And he's happy, he is—it's nice to be cared for, to care about someone. With Lee it was always fast, often rough, and they never lingered. It was fulfilling a need, and it was fun, and they did care about each other, of course they did, but. Lee wasn't really like that. Dean said—Dean thought he wasn't either.

But Cassie. With Cassie he has someone to hold, someone to hold him. Someone he can be gentle with without feeling exposed. He can make her happy, make her feel good, and in return have someone to… come home to. Share some carefully rationed pieces of himself with. It isn't… as good as it was, with Lee, or with Nate, but. It's reality. It's how things are supposed to be. With Cassie he can have what he couldn't have with Lee, because it wouldn't be something he needed to hide, not from John, not from anyone. And if anyone said otherwise he could clock them in the face without shame.

Is it love? How would he know if it was? People in movies act like you just *know* , but that shit doesn't happen in real life. He has no examples of it, anyway. Seems to him like love is just finding someone you like and holding on with both hands.

He just… needs to get her on board. With the whole. Monster hunting. Thing.

To say she takes it poorly would be a massive understatement. She thinks it's a joke, at first. Gets angry when he won't back down. Then scared, and angry again. He offers proof; she won't look at it. He asks for time; she won't give it. She tells him: stop, or leave.

He leaves.

He wonders, later, if he ever really wanted it to work at all.

Chapter 2: Part 2

2005

John goes missing, and Dean—Dean doesn't know how to do this alone. Doesn't know who he is without his father breathing down his neck. Even when John would disappear for weeks or months at a time, Dean could still feel his presence looming over his shoulder. There were check-in phone calls. Now there's nothing, Dean has nothing and no one and he can't—he can't. He can't be alone.

So he pulls Sam back into the life, which no matter how much it hurt when he left, no matter how much he hated that it happened, he'd sworn to himself he wouldn't do. Sam got out. Sam was stronger than him, did what he'll never be able to do. But Dean can't… he can't.

So he's hunting with Sam again. Stuck in a loop of giddiness and shame—shame for needing him, shame for taking him out of what he had. He can't help but think it's his fault, somehow. He pulled Sam back into the life, and immediately his girlfriend is killed. Killed by a monster, same as their mom. Who's the common denominator here?

Hunting with Sam is different from John. He's always been Sam's protector, but now Dean's the leader instead of the soldier. He can be more himself, in a lot of ways, not worrying about John's anger or judgement. But Sam's changed a lot, and Dean has too, and the easy patterns they'd learned in childhood, that had spiderweb-cracked slowly through Sam's last few years, seem to have shattered entirely.

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A weird side effect of hunting with Sam is the amount of times people mistake them for a couple instead of siblings. It's mostly people trying to be performatively accepting, occasionally someone trying to get a dig in. He tells himself he's not sure which is worse, until he realizes that's a lie. He knows what to do with derision.

Ever since he lost his baby fat in his mid-teens, he's had other hunters looking down their nose at him, teasing him for being too pretty, too soft. He's built up wall after wall to shield himself—from the sarcastic jabs he tosses out, to the way he practices how to walk and what to wear. He sets up a front that he is not to be fucked with. Every time people sneer or smirk he puts up another brick; his shame is the mortar holding it all together. But acceptance—performative or
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otherwise—is not something he ever learned to handle with grace.

He swears off men for a long time. It's too risky, with Sam. Okay, there are a few occasions when their cash dwindles and hustling is a bust. Sam thinks he's hustling, or prowling for women, when he's really out back or in the bathroom on his knees. It's a huge risk. He knows he shouldn't. There are other ways.

But sometimes, there aren't.

Sometimes he doesn't look too hard.

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John dies, and for the next two years Dean feels as if he's trying to push a boulder up a muddy cliff. Sam dies, and the boulder takes him over, crushes him under its weight. The only way out is to start pushing again… or to walk away. He can't walk away. He doesn't know how.

So he makes a deal.

2008

He thinks, for a short time after Hell, that things might be different. An angel had remade him, right? He was reborn, free from all his past scars. Surely an angel would fix the most glaring fault, whatever had grown wrong inside him. It'll be better now, different. If not cured then at least realigned. "Rehymenated," he tells Sam.

But the next time he's with a woman it's the same as it always is. It's nice, it's fun, he convinces his body he wants it and it responds. But it's clear that nothing changed, that the angel either didn't know or didn't care enough to fix this broken part of him, to flip the switch the right direction.

Then he starts dreaming about said angel, and that is a whole other can of worms. Because of course his fucked up head would focus on something—someone—so unobtainable that the very thought is laughable. But there's a tug under his breastbone whenever he's in the presence of Castiel, this so-called Angel of the Lord. It's not just attraction; it's not anything he has words for. He's drawn to him, terrified of him in equal measure. Sometimes the terror almost feels like longing.
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He remembers Hell, though he tells Sam he doesn't. How do you even begin to put into words forty years of torment and torture? The pain he felt, the cruelty he doled out? . But he remembers it. He remembers…

Light, brighter and more beautiful than any other in existence, and in its beauty, pain beyond measure. It burns at him, a cleansing fire, sloughing away the dead parts of his soul. ***Do not be afraid*** , it says, but he has no ears to hear it, and it has no mouth to speak. He's terrified.

He fights it all the way out, claws at it, screams and tears and curses. *You don't understand what I've done. Leave me. This is where I belong. This is who I am. This is all I am.*

Do not be afraid , it says again. Then, louder, reverberating through every plane of existence, ***Dean Winchester is saved.***

He never speaks of it. Tries not to think of it. It's a Hell-dream, nothing more. He buries it down, down, and it's not until—it's not until much, much later that he'll remember.

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"I have doubts," he says, this unfathomable creature. And yet he believes in Dean.

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They meet another angel, a fallen one—Anna. When she explains how angels don't feel emotions, not like humans do, Dean can't help but picture Cas on that bench by the playground. Doubt—doubt is a human emotion, is it not?

When she kisses him, he doesn't stop her. He never does. It's easier that way. It's a comfort for them both, a way to forget for just a moment.

When she places her hand over Castiel's brand, he doesn't - he doesn't know what to feel about that.

They have to give her up. It hurts. It always hurts. But at this point, all he is is pain, anyway.

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His siren is a man, and it scares the shit out of him.

Not because he's attracted to Nick—no, that's no surprise, even if he's tried to push it down in recent years. No, it's that the siren chose that form as representative of what Dean desires most. Because if you asked him, he'd say, in all honesty, that men are a fun distraction at best, and a danger at worst. Obviously, finding a woman is his first choice. Even if it's not as easy, not quite as good between the sheets, there are so many things he can get from a hookup with a woman that he'd never find, never be comfortable asking for from a man. With women there's a bit of a chase to it, a dance, and usually at least a little getting-to-know-you portion. There's usually a bed, you take your time, maybe even stick around for a little afterglow. Men are rough, hard and fast, dangerous. That's what he keeps telling himself. You get your rocks off, you leave. Usually he doesn't even know names.

Nick wasn't like that at all. Nick wanted to get to know him; he talked about cars, about music, and Dean was embarrassingly *in*. It was exhilarating, something Dean had never known he wanted because he'd never been offered it before, not since Lee, and Lee was—well. Always a bit more interested in Lee than he was in Dean.

And it's all a lie.

Or… maybe not a lie, exactly. Nick wanted a partner, wanted to love and be loved—his twisted version of it—more than he wanted a fuck. So in that, maybe, it wasn't fake. But of course for him, it was all about control. Having someone fall so hard that they'd do anything for him.

Then there's Sam and Bobby.

He's pretty sure Bobby suspects something, though the good thing about Bobby is he'll never say. He doesn't think Sam has put two and two together, but he can't be *sure* , and the uncertainty is making him spin out a bit.

"Pretty clever of him, making himself into a dude so we wouldn't suspect him, right? I mean," he says with a nervous chuckle, "it's not like you or I would have been, you know, into him or anything. So. That was a pretty smart disguise, huh." *God, stop talking.*

Sam looked at him sideways. "Yeah, what was that about, anyway? How did he get you, did he knock you out or something?"

“Nah, I had a flask. I was stupid. I offered him a drink, and y’know. He poisoned it, so. That’s all she wrote.” Then they’d made out a little, but that would go with him to his grave. Thank god they hadn’t gotten further than that, but it was only because Dean needed to make it back to the hotel room to keep their cover up.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Crisis averted, then. He tells himself that’s a good thing, that it would be devastating if Sam found out. Tells himself he’s not disappointed it wasn’t taken out of his hands.

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Right on the heels of the siren he and Sam get thrown into Zachariah’s Office Space simulation. After it’s over, Sam’s convinced it was all a stupid manipulation, and in some respects he’s right. Everything from their history to their memories and environment were constructed for them, to teach them a lesson. But aside from all that, Dean knows his mind was still his own. His behavior was different because of his environment and upbringing, but Zachariah didn’t force him to drink kale smoothies or… or watch Project Runway. Zachariah didn’t make him like it. Didn’t make him… miss it, just a little.

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It starts small, at first. Little glimpses, small cracks in the emotionless immovable angelic façade. He has doubts, he says. He’d do anything if it was within his power to keep Dean from Alastair—which, wow. *Anything* is a pretty big word. He tells Dean about the archangel protecting Chuck even though it’s clearly against orders. He visits Dean in a dream, says he has more to tell him, seems like he’s ready to join their side fully. And then… he’s gone.

He comes back different, reprogrammed almost, and Dean understands the anger he feels but he doesn’t understand the hurt bubbling up underneath it. Why wouldn’t it end this way? What evidence has there been in his life that he could trust anyone but family? That he could trust an *angel* of all things.

Turns out he can’t even trust Sam.

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Dean's not sure why he thinks he can get through to Cas—why he *knows* in his gut that there's something here, some small crack he can chisel away at and slip through. There certainly hasn't been any evidence of it these last few days, after Cas came back from whatever reconditioning boot camp he got sent to. It took months the first time to get him to start his little rebellions, and there shouldn't be any hope of breaking through now when they may not even have hours before the end.

But it's there. He can feel it—feels it when Cas turns with Dean's touch, sees it when he follows Dean with his eyes. This thread of connection, of kinship between them pulling Cas in, carving out a spot for him behind Dean's breastbone. He *feels* it, and *pulls* .

And Cas falls.

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"We're making it up as we go."

There's a swoop in his stomach, familiar and foreign in equal parts. He doesn't dwell on it. He can't dwell on it. He has to save Sam, save the world—he pushes it down.

2009

He doesn't know what he's doing.

He's spiraling out after leaving Sam; he can feel himself getting manic. He knows the buzzing under his skin that's going to lead to bad choices and an even worse crash afterwards. He hasn't been alone since Sam was in Stanford, not really, not for more than a day or three, and he was always working at the time. He needs to work. That's all. Just needs to work.

So he does. Violently.

It doesn't help.

He really, really, *really* wants to get fucked. He wants to shut his brain off, let someone else call the shots, and get fucked so hard he forgets his name. But he hasn't had that since Lee, and he's never… he can't just trust someone like that. Especially not since Hell. No fucking way.
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Maybe he can find a girl who can give him at least part of that equation… but the thought turns his stomach. Trying to pick someone up right now, someone who can give him what he wants, it just seems insurmountable. So, he figures he'll have an evening in with his hand and some pay-per-view to try and dampen this buzzing in his head for at least a night. He needs it so bad he's already half-hard in anticipation, which is pathetic really. He doesn't even have any toys, too scared of Sam finding them. He should get some toys.

Then Cas shows up.

The part of his brain yelling *danger! Danger!* is being quickly buried under the high that is proximity to Cas. Extremely close proximity, as Cas appears directly behind him and scares the shit out of him. His grown-up brain manages to get out a "personal space," but doesn't manage to send the message to his legs to actually move. Thankfully—or unfortunately—Cas remembers their previous conversation (he'd popped in while Dean was showering and Dean definitely did NOT scream) and steps away.

There's this magnetic pull to Cas, though, and within a few minutes of conversation they are back in each other's space. Cas, of course, doesn't seem to mind or even to notice, and without Sam's presence constantly reminding Dean to keep his totally-unaffected-by-dude-angel mask up, the *danger* part gets quieter and quieter as the *fun-need-want* part takes the wheel.

The brothel is… the best/worst idea he's ever had. He's so worked up and manic that he knew if he didn't find a distraction for them he'd be on his knees within the hour. There's a moment, even, when he really truly considers it. What's the worst that could happen, Cas saying no? He could just laugh it off and deflect, like he's done a million times to failed hookup attempts. It shouldn't be a big deal—a little embarrassing, maybe. Definitely a bit of an ego hit, but that's all. It's not like he actually *cares* , he's just antsy and horny and Cas is extremely hot and the thought of doing that for him—well. It's enough to make him say some things he shouldn't.

But not enough to go all the way, apparently. Because while it *shouldn't* be a big deal, for some reason he refuses to examine… it kinda is.

He's kinda screwed.

2010

He was an idiot to think Cas would stay.

He'd started to forget, as Cas slowly fell and became a full-time part of the team, that he wasn't actually human. He wasn't actually one of them, really—didn't have the same goals or priorities, emotions or… desires. It was so easy to forget, so easy to pretend, when Cas was right there next to them, eating and sleeping and snarking that there was a future here. Team Free Will, fighting the good fight together to the end.

Turns out the end was sooner than they'd hoped. And after the end, well. Dean was alone. Again.

He's not sure what he expected, really, after the big battle. Well truthfully he expected to die, win or lose. But living… having Bobby live, and Cas live, even if Sam didn't, he thought, maybe they could mourn together. It would take a long time, sure, and he's not sure if they could ever succeed. But maybe, maybe he could take their broken family and lick their wounds together, figure out what the world looked like for them on the other side of saving it.

But Bobby leaves. Shakes his hand, gives him a hug, says "Keep in touch, son," and leaves.

So he's left with Cas, which is fine. Great, even. Cas gets him, eerily so sometimes, and there's not much he needs to hide. Besides the one thing, but well, he's used to that by now. He can let his guard down a bit, maybe they can take some time off, have an honest to god vacation. Finally get Cas to let his hair down now that the world isn't ending.

Then Cas leaves. Of course he does. He's all angeled up again, and there's a power vacuum in heaven, so of course he's not sticking around. Who is Dean to him, anyway? A fellow soldier, a nuisance, really. A necessary evil. A job he couldn't quit, at best. Now that the war's over he's going back home to Heaven, because why would he stay? What is there to hold him here? Who would choose this dirty, painful human life if they had the choice?

Who besides Dean, anyway.

So he goes to the only place he can think of, the only person who'd asked him to stay. He goes to Lisa. He knows it isn't fair of him to

saddle her with all his baggage—apocalypse related and otherwise—but he *needs* the human connection right now, to be touched and held and *seen* by someone he doesn't have to lie to (at least… not about his former job), who isn't going to leave in the morning. And, well, she had offered. Sam is dead, Cas is… gone, and Bobby is grieving himself. But Lisa… Lisa is uncomplicated.

"When I picture myself happy, it's with you. And the kid." It hadn't been a complete lie. He doesn't think about a white picket fence future often, the house and life he'd dreamed up as a kid, and when he does it's fuzzy, like a picture slightly out of tune. He knows it's what he's supposed to want, supposed to be fighting for, supposed to serve as the prize at the top of the long and treacherous climb that is his life. He tells himself the problem is just unfamiliarity, that surely once he settles in and buries his demons under responsibility and family that he'll find the happiness everyone else seems to capture so easily.

But being with Lisa is… hard. Harder than he'd ever anticipated. What he at first wrote off as trauma isn't getting any easier. He stays up late so she's asleep when he joins her in bed. Drinks in case she isn't. Drinks to drown out the night terrors.

Now that the danger has passed, now that he's sedentary, nightmares come at him in wave after wave. Every horrible thing that's happened, everything that might have happened, almost happened, and even things he's never considered, his unconscious blends it all together and chokes him with it night after night. Lisa tries to wake him, tries to hold him through it, but it just ends up leaving him feeling guilty and scraped raw from the inside out.

He should love her. He wants to love her. Sometimes he almost thinks he does. But he doesn't *want* her. He doesn't want anything anymore. Maybe he's just broken. Maybe this is as good as it gets.

She stops trying, after a while.

2011

Trying to convince Cas to stop feels like his heart is being ripped in two.

Cas lies to them, betrays them in the worst ways. Dean feels so stupid. Sam and Bobby knew, but Dean refused and kept refusing until the

last possible moment when it all fell apart.

He thought he knew him. He thought… that there was some humanity there. That Cas considered them family as much as Dean did. That what they'd been through mattered.

Judging by the way that Bobby and Sam keep sending pitying glances his way, not to mention Cas' own actions, it's apparent only Dean ever thought that way.

You're just a man. I'm an angel. That is the crux of it right there, isn't it. Dean will only ever be just a man.

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When Dean falls in love, he's 33, pulling a sodden trench coat out of a canal.

Well, if he's completely honest with himself—which he tries not to make a habit of—he's been *falling* for quite a bit longer than that. Since *we're making it up as we go* . Or, perhaps even *just so you understand - why I can't help.* The point of origin is foggy, but the destination is clear. Being dashed upon the rocks at the bottom of the chasm that is his love for Castiel.

It's a gut-punch of a realization, curling his fingers into the wet cloth, feeling a pit open up in his stomach and a burning in his throat. It hits him, right then, that he hadn't ever been in love—not really, not like this. Not Cassie, not Lisa, not even Lee. This was it, all along. This yearning, pulling, warmth he's felt for two years… and this utter devastation he feels now.

He swallows it down, but it festers, tears into the core of him and destroys everything good. This, at least, he's familiar with—this nothingness, numbness, wake up drinking do the job drinking pass out drinking wake up again, if you're lucky.

If you're unlucky, that is. If you asked him, he'd say he doesn't *want* to die, of course not—he just doesn't want to live, either. If he could just surrender to the nothingness instead…

Cas comes back, Miraculous Resurrection Number Three. But everything else goes to shit, because that's the way of things. Dean loses him, finds him, loses him in a different way. Again and again and again, like Charlie Brown and the football, Dean falls on his back every time as Cas is yanked away.

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2012

A year in Purgatory. Half of it spent looking for Cas, half spent trying to keep him from bailing again. Trying to keep him and Benny from strangling each other. Trying and eventually failing to convince Cas to leave with them.

He doesn't blame him, really. Dean would also choose Purgatory over himself.

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Since Lisa, he doesn't try much any more. Sometimes, when he really needs the distraction, the closeness, the physicality of it, he'll make an effort. Making someone feel good. Doing something he's good at. But it's not often. With men it's even less. He tells himself it's because it's harder to hide from Sam with the stability of the bunker, but that's only part of it. The rest is the ache in his chest after, the reminder of what he wants, what he shoves down and buries and paves over bursting out again. With women he can keep himself detached, keep himself safe—physically and otherwise. With men it's much too raw, much too real, much too… well. Good.

When he does finally give in and find a man, he finds he's good at it by now. Knowing where to go, how to speak the language, scope for someone making slightly longer eye contact than necessary. "Accidental" touches just this side of casual, just that side of deniable —it's rare they use a bed or even a hotel room. Not since Hell.
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Always in the back of his mind what he really wants, harder and harder to deny.

Sometimes he mourns what he might have had, if he'd known. If he hadn't spent so much time trying to make it work in the wrong places. But what other choice would he have had, anyway? It's not like he could have shacked up with some guy, not when he spent his life on the road with his brother. The year with Lisa—that was stupid, but it's not like another option would have worked out. Not when… not when it turns out he was already falling.

And now that they do have stability, and he could, if he wanted, actually date around Lebanon, well. He doesn't want to.

At a certain point, when the time between hookups can be counted in months instead of weeks, he has to admit to himself that whatever it was he used to get from them—the closeness, the intimacy, the distraction—are just drops in an empty bucket. And what he wants, what he *wants* …

Well. It's never mattered, anyways.

2013

Cas is human. He's human, and mortal, and he *died again* , and Dean has to tell him he can't stay. He gives him $500 in cash, a burner phone, and a duffle full of Dean's clothes, and he throws him out in the cold. He tells him to keep in touch, to call if he needs anything, but he knows it won't happen. Cas won't ask for help. He learned that from Dean.

He tells himself not to be selfish, that this could be a good thing for Cas. He can go live a life, have a chance to get away from all this crap. He's smart, he's resourceful, and sure he's a little weird but he can make friends. He's a nice guy, a… a kind person. He cares about people. Someone will see that, certainly.

He tells himself no news is good news. He tells himself he's okay with never hearing from Cas again, if it means he's happy and safe. He pushes it out of his mind as much as he can. He's got bigger problems, after all, like the shifty-ass angel he stuffed inside his brother.

Then he gets a call, and standing outside a Gas 'n Sip in Rexford, watching Cas in his dorky little vest smiling his dorky little smile, he

thinks, *god dammit* .

2014

He's a demon, for a while. He doesn't like to think about it, doesn't like to remember, but it does put… certain things… in perspective. For a demon, sex is about power as much as pleasure. It's instinctual, animalistic. Thankfully, whatever weird magic the Mark of Cain had over him to demonize him didn't get rid of his core self entirely—he wasn't going around raping and killing innocents. He was just… a dick, really. Selfish, with a complete and utter lack of inhibitions. Sex was about getting off, not about who he was getting off with. He would have fucked literally anyone willing. There was no attraction there, just lust, sensation, control.

He doesn't like to think about it.

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There's something pushing at the back of his mind, the same thought that's been lurking since he was thirteen. The itch of - *what if I'm just built wrong. What if it's never as good with girls. What if I can never have what I'm supposed to want… or want what I'm supposed to have.*

He doesn't actually think it's wrong anymore. He knows wrong, he spent forty years in Hell witnessing and participating in *wrong* , he's spent three decades hunting down *wrong* . He *is* broken inside, he *is* built wrong, but it's not because of this. He knows that, he *does* , but. God, but it's so much easier to just pretend.

While pretending is all he knows, it's also exhausting, and getting harder the older he gets. Harder to remember the point, harder to care what people think. And he knows—he *knows* —that at this point in his life no one around him would care, that the important people will be supportive. That random strangers judge him for all sorts of things, why does he care so much if they judge him for this?

When he'd met Charlie it was like seeing in color after living in a world of grey. To see someone so completely open about who they are and what they love, not hiding it under a mountain of denial and self-hate. She's not without her own anxieties—it quickly became clear that she has a complicated past and plenty of ghosts in her closet as well—but her enthusiasm, her *freedom* is infectious. She's just Charlie,
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take her or leave her, and she dances her way into Dean's heart as if there was a spot ready and waiting for her.

He's never in his life "come out" to anyone, not even himself, but he's starting to think maybe… one day… what if he did?

The opportunity comes the morning after Charlie meets Cas for the first time. He takes her out for breakfast, just the two of them; it's been so long since they've had any one-on-one time. He doesn't go with the conversation in mind, but as he sits with her, something settles inside him, and for the first time it doesn't seem so terrifying.

They go for a walk after eating, there's a park with a little duck pond the next block over. They sit overlooking the long stretch of grass down to the water, where a mom and two toddlers are picnicking. The older one is trying to catch a duck.

"Can I ask you something?" Dean manages to get out, at last.

Charlie turns away from the family shenanigans and looks over at him. Her expression turns serious; she must see something in his face. "Yeah, of course."

"It's kinda personal."

She spreads her hands, palms up. "I'm an open book."

He taps his fingers against his leg for a moment. "How'd you know you were, um." He clears his throat. "How'd you know you were into women?"

She's quiet for a beat. Nervous, he flicks his eyes over to see her biting her lip in contemplation. "I sort of always knew, I guess. Most people don't, I don't think… or they do but only in hindsight, maybe. I didn't… there wasn't really some big moment of revelation. I just only wanted to be around girls… which led to wanting to kiss girls, which led to, you know. The rest. Since my parents died, I guess I didn't have to worry about anyone's expectations or whatever."

"Did you ever, uh, try? With a guy?" He winces. "Sorry, that's probably rude, right? Forget it."

She laughs. "Well, yeah, if you asked some random lesbian at the bar that would be totally gross, but we're cool. I did, once. Kissed a guy at a party. It was… eh. You know? Just eh." She makes a face. "And lemme tell you, I've had some bad hookups, but kissing a girl has

never been *eh* . So, that was that, didn't see any reason to push the issue. Women are hot, men are… not."

Dean laughs. "Okay, fair enough. When was your first time? Just—just kissing, you know, kid stuff."

"Middle school, we were twelve. Her name was Melissa. We were having a sleepover, and we - " she laughed— "we made a blanket fort around the TV so we could watch Star Trek. I know, shocking. It was late, we got the giggles, and I just… didn't even think about it, just leaned over and kissed her."

"Did she kiss back?"

"Yeah, I mean, as much as you could call a couple pecks by 7th graders kissing. That's all that happened, really. We held hands a little. Adults were none the wiser, girls hold hands all the time, right? Anyways, we were twitterpated for like, a month, and then had some stupid twelve year old fight and that was that."

"That's ridiculously cute."

She smiles over at him. "What about you, when was your first kiss?"

Dean's hands tighten into fists, he makes himself relax them and rubs the back of his neck. This was why he'd started this, but asking is so much easier than answering. "Well… my first time with a girl was a lot like yours. 'Cept I was sixteen, and she kissed me."

Charlie gasps in delight, and the corners of his mouth twitch up despite himself. He manages to continue. "My first time with a guy was um. A year later." He chances a glance over to see her grinning. He smiles back ruefully. "You're not even surprised, are you?"

"Oh! Oh sorry, was I supposed to be? Fuck, um. Yeah, that's, uh, super surprising dude, wow! Totally shocked."

He winces. "I didn't think I was that obvious. It's not—I don't—"

She puts her hand on his arm. "Hey. You're not, okay? Not to anyone who's not looking. I just have a, you know, a sense for it. You know, 'gaydar' is kind of a joke, but it's also not. It's a safety thing, you get really good at kind of… instinctively knowing who you're gonna be safe around? Who's safe to come out to, let your guard down, not have to be worried about being judged or—or worse. Not many straight guys ping the 'safety' meter."

“What about Sam?”

She shrugs. “Sam’s a good egg. It’s not like I was scared of him or anything, just. Takes a little longer, that’s all.”

He clears his throat, picks at the seam of his pant leg. “And, uh. And Cas?”

He can feel her eyes on him for a long moment, his cheeks heating up. “Are we gonna pretend that’s a casual question?” she asks softly.

He shrugs, rubs his hand on his thigh. “Just, y’know. Curious, or whatever.”

“Well… he’s not human, so I don’t think any of the standard stuff applies. He’s not gonna have the same prejudices or hang-ups we do, right?”

“Right. Well. I know he’s been with women—well, a woman, a reaper actually, tried to kill him, long story—but he’s never really seemed, I dunno. Interested, really. In anyone. In any of that. So I guess I was just… wondering. What your take was. S’not important.”

“Hmm.” She’s quiet a long moment, Dean tries not to fidget. “Well, you know him better than I do, of course, but. He did, like, fall from Grace for you, right? That’s pretty hefty stuff.”

“No! I mean, yeah, but. That wasn’t for me, it was for, you know, the world. Saving humanity, stopping the apocalypse, yadda yadda.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“Anyway, that doesn’t… have anything to do with anything. That’s just Cas being Cas.”

“Well from where I stand, ‘Cas being Cas’ mostly applies to you. So. It’s not my place to say whether there’s any romantic intention or anything there, but. If he’s interested in anyone, dude, it’s you.”

Dean’s chest tightens. This isn’t how he expected this conversation to go; he’s not ready to talk about this. He’s barely able to talk about men at all. The Cas thing is too much, too huge. He needs to keep that buried. “I uh. I don’t—I can’t—”

“Hey. Look at me. You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready to do. Or talk about anything you’re not ready to talk about. Everyone’s

gotta do this on their own time, in their own way."

"Yeah. Okay."

"But… thank you, for telling me." Dean shrugs, and she reaches over to squeeze his hand. "Love you."

He puts his arm around her and pulls her in to rest her head on his shoulder. "I know."

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2016

Sleeping with women has gotten harder—or, well. More difficult. At a certain point Dean realizes it's been more than six months, maybe even a full year, since he even tried to sleep with anyone. He chalks it up to getting older, their crazy lives, his body slowing down and settling. But then his angel brings him coffee, smiles or squints or rolls his eyes at Dean's antics, and he knows. No. No, that's not it.

Last time he's with a woman, after Cas almost dies, he can't get it up. It doesn't matter to her, they've both had a bit to drink and he makes
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it worth her time. He even spends the night, which he hasn't done since… he can’t remember. But she’s sweet, and kind, and having someone to hold is a comfort. But when he says goodbye, he feels something crumble inside him. The last piece of denial that has been hanging on, telling him that it was just the wrong woman, or the wrong time, or the wrong anything-but-him. That it wasn't him, and if it was it was temporary. Just a fluke. Just a dry spell. Just his crazy fucked up life.

But it’s not. And maybe he’s almost okay with that.

Chapter 3: Part 3

Chapter Notes

> (the only divergence from canon before 13x06 is that the witch twins are still alive and well. sorry yockey, I retconned you.)

2017

Cas is dead. And this time he's not coming back.

Dean brings his body in. Prepares it. Sam offers to help, of course, and Dean feels a little bad for sending him away. Cas was his friend too. But Dean can't… it has to be him. It's supposed to be him.

Dean has been low, before. When John died. When he made the deal for Sam. When he was counting down to hell. When Sam died, again. When Cas died. When Bobby died. When Charlie died. Death, death, death, all there is is death, and each one holds his head under water that much longer.

He doesn't know if he can reach the surface, this time. He's too far down, too far gone, too tired and too heavy to do anything but sink.

He'd started to think… with Mom back, you know, they had their issues, and it was hard, but they'd made it out the other side, he thought. They were learning how to be, with each other. They'd crested the hill and he could see something good just on the other side, just a little more work, a little more time, and they'd get there.

She's dead now, too. Or as good as.

And Cas—well. He never let himself think about it much. The what-ifs. Cas is an angel, and that's not changing, not again. He missed whatever miniscule shot he might have had while Cas was human. Not worth dwelling on. Cas is Cas, and Dean was thrilled just to have him sticking around more. Actually treating the bunker like a home base instead of a pit stop. Spending downtime with them, hanging out, it's more than Dean ever thought he'd get. And he savored every minute of it and told himself he could be satisfied with this, this was all he truly needed. Just Cas being there.

And it was. But it wasn't all he *wanted* . And now, watching the flames of yet another pyre in a string of pyres leading back to the flames that

took his mother the first time, he realizes—maybe what he *needs* isn't enough anymore. Maybe he's spent his whole life *needing* but never allowing himself to *want* . What *does* he want?

Nothing, now. There's nothing left. His brother—thank god—but that's not enough, anymore. It's never been enough, it was just all he had for so long that holding on with both hands was all he could focus on. He'd finally learned to start loosening that grip, start pulling other people into the fold… and here he is. The last of them burning.

Cas is dead. And he's not coming back.

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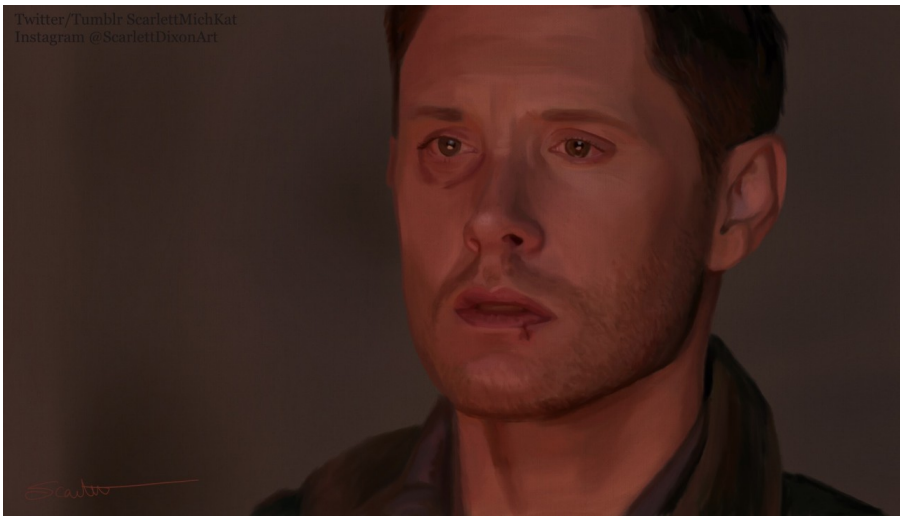
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He slips away to spread Cas' ashes in a meadow a few miles from the bunker. He feels a little bad about not asking Sam if he wanted to come—and a little voice in his head says he should have asked the kid, too—but Dean can't do what he needs to do, say what he needs to say with an audience.

He holds the ashes close to his chest—they're in an old coffee tin, scrounged from the cabin. "Cas, I—I know you can't hear me. Not this time. But I… I gotta get this out." He takes a shaky breath. "You're my best friend. I don't know if I told you that, but you are. And you're our family, always will be—but you're more than that… more than that to me. I just didn't have the words for it. Probably never will. Too late now, anyways, but… I needed to say it. I need to say it.

"I love you. And I miss you. And I don't—I don't know if I can do this without you, man. I can't—I'm trying, but I just. I don't know what to do."

He wipes at his eyes with his free hand, pinches the bridge of his nose. "This kid… I dunno, man. I know you wanted us to save him. I know you… believed. I wish I could too, but. I look at him and all I see is you, laying there on the ground. I don't know… I don't know if I can get past this.

"But none of that's on you, okay? I don't—I don't blame you for any of it. And I hope… I hope wherever you are, you're at peace. You deserve that much."

He turns the can over a cluster of wildflowers and watches as the ashes collect on their petals, or float away with their pollen. "Goodbye, Cas."

He falls to his knees on the hard ground and cries.

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The next few weeks are a haze. The kid is so much like Cas Dean can barely look at him. He hates it. He hates that something deep inside him is starting to whisper *protect* . Every time he closes his eyes he sees wings of ash. Every time he opens them, he sees Cas' eyes in a stranger's face. Stolen. He knows trusting the kid will bite them in the ass, it always does. But Sam wants to use him, and Dean… he can't fight anymore. He doesn't have anything left.

When the opportunity presents itself in an extremely haunted house in Grand Junction, Colorado, Dean doesn't hesitate. He doesn't wait for Sam to be on board (he won't be), he doesn't spare even a thought for what they could do instead. There's no time, he says. There's no time, he tells himself. He plunges the needle in and for just a moment, just one short moment, doesn't have to live or breathe or be.

He hadn't actually remembered Billie's promise, that there were no more do-overs for the Winchesters, but then again… maybe he had.

Maybe you're not that guy anymore, the guy who saves the world. Maybe he's not. Maybe something broke in him that all the king's horses can't put back together. Maybe they'd all be better off if they don't even try.

His whole life he's been fighting, and he's so very, very tired.

If it's my time, it's my time, he tells her.

Sam, Sam'll be fine. Dean's always needed Sam more than Sam needs Dean. Even when Dean was skipping meals and stealing bread to keep Sam fed, he knew—Sam could make it, on his own. Sam wanted out; Dean didn't. Story of Dean's life, really—loving too much, needing too much, clinging too hard, watching people leave. His dad, Sam—a hundred times Sam. Lisa, his mom, Cas.

Of course, she's not going to let him off that easy. Apparently he wants it too much.

You've got work to do . Yeah. Ain't that always the case.

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I just need a damn win.

His phone rings, and he doesn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed at another job coming before he can process this one. But it's not a job. The voice on the other end is a gut punch of a different kind.

Hello, Dean.

He feels the blood drain from his face, and he can't answer, he can't, he can't. It's not real, it can't be real, it has to be real.

He u-turns and makes a three-hour trip in 94 minutes. He'd wanted to keep Cas on the phone, but he said he'd only had enough change for
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the one call. He'd explain when they got there.

It's a trap. It has to be a trap. A trick. A… hallucination, even. Some weird side effect of being technically dead for several minutes. He can feel Sam's eyes boring into the side of his head, worrying, but it doesn't matter. Cas'll either be there, or he won't. And when he isn't—well. That'll be that.

Cas is there. Cas is *there* , and it's real, he can feel it—can feel him, solid under his arms as Dean hugs him and shakes. He wants to stay there, he wants to hold on and never let go again, he wants to crawl inside Cas' skin and curl up behind his ribs. He wants to take him home and feed him and bathe him and lay him out in Dean's bed and worship him…

He wants, and wants, and wants. And he knows, now, that this is it. No matter what the future brings, Cas is it.

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The thing about being in love with your best friend is that to get through the day you have to bury it down deep or the constant ache of it will be unbearable. But the thing about being in love is that everything they do, every insignificant little thing, makes you love them more, makes it burst up through your chest in spite of your efforts. And when the person you love is also your best friend, also lives with you and works with you and watches your movies and eats your food and laughs at your jokes, well. You're fucked.

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They get Mom back, by the skin of their teeth. Manage to take out Lucifer and close the door on Michael, while they're at it. If getting Cas back was a big win, this is… unprecedented. They have Jack on their side, and he's learning to control his power more and more every day. He's learning how to be human, too. Turns out the kid takes after Cas even more than they'd hoped. He's kind and thoughtful, compassionate and gentle. Every day that passes Dean is more and more secure in the belief that the kid is *good* , that he's maybe one of the best things that ever happened to them. Cas loves him, Sam loves him, and Dean… well. It's Cas' kid. How could he not?

Dean teaches him to drive, teaches him to cook. Introduces him to music, bad diner food, and 80's movies. Dean finally renovates that one storage room he's had his eye on, turns it into a rec room—the "Dean Cave" he calls it, but everyone knows he built it so they'd have

a place to spend time together as a family.

And that's what they are—a family.

Dean institutes movie nights every Saturday. He finds a big squishy couch and a couple armchairs at a yardsale so they have room for all four of them, plus a guest or two. Mom happens to stop by one Saturday and finds them all sprawled out watching E.T.—she makes a habit of joining them as much as she can. Dean ends up with three people who need to catch up on several decades worth of cinema and he couldn't be more thrilled.

Movie night starts bleeding over into other days. Saturday is for the blockbusters or culturally significant movies they all need to catch up on—the Spielbergs, the Godfathers, etc. Early on Dean throws together easy stuff for snacks, nachos or cheese fries, but as time goes on he starts branching out to sliders, popcorn chicken, corn dogs, mozzarella sticks. Monday is Jack's night, where they watch Disney and Studio Ghibli and musicals. Wednesdays are Sam—classics, indie films, documentaries. And Fridays… well. Fridays become Dean-And-Cas nights.

Everyone tries to make it for Saturdays, but the rest of the week is dependent on schedules and interest. They all make it down for Toy Story and The Breakfast Club. Dean mostly bows out on Sam's nights, though he still makes everyone snacks. Sam doesn't always stick around for Jack's selections, though a lot of times even if he isn't interested he'll come down with a book and some earbuds just to be with everyone.

Fridays start off as Cas' night, but Cas defers to Dean almost every week which means Fridays turn into a combination of westerns, cheesy horror, and ridiculous 80's action flicks. Lots of Dean going, "Hey Cas, watch this part! Hey did you see that?" Sam rolls his eyes and starts making other plans. Jack is usually game for anything, but more often than not Sam starts taking him out on Fridays to let Dean and Cas "do their male-bonding thing, or whatever."

Dean is happy to have the one-on-one time, and once it's just the two of them they settle into a routine. Dean grabs popcorn, candy, and soda for authenticity, and they plop together in the middle of the couch to deliberate over this week's choices. They usually end up watching two or three movies, and Dean ends up sprawling out with

his legs tossed over Cas' lap. It's a little bit perfect, and Dean's the happiest he can remember being… ever, really. And if sometimes there's a voice in his head whispering that it could be more perfect, that he could be more happy, he shoves it down hard. If there's one thing this life has taught him, it's that you don't tempt fate.

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About six months after they close the rift, Dean sees Lee again. Dean and Mary finish up a case in Oklahoma, and Mary heads out early but Dean sticks around to fuel up and get breakfast. He got thrown around some, and it's taking a bit longer to recover from bumps and bruises as he gets older. When he sees a story about missing people he figures he'll hop over and check it out. Maybe he can wrap it up quick, but if it's something more complicated he can call in Sam or Cas to drive down and meet him.

Turns out the bar at the center of the disappearances is owned by Lee Webb. That should have been a red flag, possible supernatural occurrences so close to a former hunter, but Dean's always been too trusting of his friends. Catching up with Lee leads into one of the best nights he's had in recent memory—hell, in distant memory—singing on stage and shooting the shit with his old friend. Which is then followed by one of the worst, when Dean has to kill him.

He doesn't tell anyone. He should, he knows he should, but then he'd have to answer questions about who Lee was and how they knew each other. While there's a non-incriminating answer, Dean doesn't have the energy to do that dance. He calls home, tells them he cleaned it up, then takes his time driving back to let it all settle.

He keeps going over it in his head, what Lee said. About being owed happiness, about getting what they deserve. He thinks about his own happiness, and how it's grown as his family has. He wasn't owed that —he fought for that, fights for it every day. He's spent his life fighting for others, and he doesn't regret that, not for a moment. He never thought he could fight for his own happiness, that had never been an option he saw for himself, but now… now he sees it.

As for what he deserves… Dean doesn't deserve Cas. He knows that. But for some reason he can't comprehend, Cas keeps coming back and sticking around, and now, for once, he shows no sign of that changing. They'd figured out how to use Jack's power to fortify Heaven (the angels were cagey on what, exactly, that entailed, but they referred to it as "new and improved"), so Cas finally doesn't feel pulled in two
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directions between his family on earth and his obligation to Heaven (in Dean's mind Cas has never owed those fuckers anything, but he realized that wasn't an argument worth having any more). So Cas is here, for good, and Dean…

He's not sure where Cas stands on the whole relationship thing. He knows Cas loves him, Cas loves all of them. He knows Cas has a… particular attachment to him that's different from Sam and Jack. But he doesn't know how that translates into human terms. Doesn't know if romantic love is even in his wheelhouse. He knows Cas has had sex once or twice, and that he seemed to enjoy it, but he also hasn't sought anything more out to Dean's knowledge. It doesn't seem to be something he really cares about one way or the other.

Dean doesn't know any of that. Isn't really sure how to find out, frankly. But what he does know is that before he can go about putting feelers out to see if they're on the same page, there are some things he needs to get better at - namely, himself. Some old hangups and fears that have dug in and festered. And he knows that for anything to work out between him and Cas, if there's any small chance of that happening, he needs to get as much out of his own way as possible before he brings Cas into it at all.

Maybe he doesn't deserve Cas. But maybe it's never about what you deserve. Maybe it's only ever about what you fight for.

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He has problems with how people see him in public, how strangers see him, what they think and assume. It's part of the reason why when he's in public he's usually playing a role—FBI, newspaper reporters, grief counselors, priests. He's been all sorts of roles, but rarely has he been Dean Winchester. Yes, it's often part of the job, but it also wasn't just that. He has The Hunter role, The Drifter at the Dive Bar role, and locally he has the Dean Campbell role. It's the closest to himself he usually gets, and he's allowed himself to open up a bit, soften up, with the townies. They know Sam is his brother, they know Jack is an unspecified relative that they've pseudo-adopted. They know Cas… exists. Dean has skillfully dodged questions about the third "brother," careful that people don't make the wrong—or the right—assumptions.

He wants to stop being careful.

The first thing he does is ask Cas to go with him to the local theater for their classics series. Tuesday nights they play some old blockbuster
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for matinee prices. They're showing Aliens this week, and Cas has only seen the first one, so it's a good excuse to get out. It's not a date—not yet—but it *could* be. It's like… a practice run. Training wheels. Dean can push his comfort zone a little while not having to be nervous about, well, an actual date. He can go up to the box office and ask for two tickets with Cas standing at his side. They can buy two sodas and a giant popcorn to share. They can move the armrest up so there's more room for the giant cardboard bowl, and bump hands when reaching for a bite.

It's perfect.

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He works on touching more—not just with Cas. He's always been self conscious about showing affection, worried about rejection, worried about being clingy, needy. That needs to change. He *wants* that to change. He puts his arm around Jack when he's showing him how to make a burger. He squeezes Mary's hand when he walks past her eating breakfast. He hugs Sam - not because they're about to die, but just because. Thankfully Sam knows well enough at this stage in their lives not to call attention to it, but he hugs back fiercely.

And Cas… Dean sits closer on movie nights, even when it's not just the two of them. He squeezes his shoulder when putting down his dinner plate. Guides him through doorways with a hand on the small of his back. Hugs him, too. Hugs everyone, in fact. It's like a floodgate has opened and everything he's craved but shoved down has finally found a release. The more he reaches out, the easier it gets; and the easier it gets, the more he wants it. He's making up for lost time and filling a hole that's been in him so long he never realized it wasn't just part of the scenery.

Dean has always been more a fan of s *howing* than *telling* when it comes to himself. Getting words out is hard, and if he can get away with not having to use them, he will. He can just live his life and let people draw their own conclusions. He realizes that if he's going to do this, if he's going to try and make it work with Cas, try to be the person he wants to be, he's going to need to… actually tell people. About himself. Sometimes. At the very least he needs to tell his family.

He hadn't planned on telling Mom first, but Mary being Mary, she's a
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few steps ahead of him.

“I was on another hunt with Max last week,” Mary says. They’re prepping dinner together—Dean’s been expanding his normal recipes to add more large meals for when everyone’s home, and Mary’s been tagging along to learn. Tonight, it’s stew. Mary’s got good knife skills so he sets her to chopping while he gathers everything else.

“Oh yeah? How’s he doing?” The twins don’t stop by the bunker often, but Mary has gotten close with them since she came back.

“Good, good. Alicia got a bit banged up on a salt ‘n burn so he needed a wingman.” She pauses, passing her chopped carrots to Dean and grabbing the potatoes. “He’s a lot of fun. Great hunter, but also just has a lot of life in him, you know? Most hunters seem like they’ve got one foot in the grave at all times, but not Max. He’s got enough life for three people.”

Dean smiles at that. The twins make him feel old at times, as do Jody’s crew, but mostly they make him feel lighter. The realization that this next generation of hunters may not have it easy—hunting never is—but they have support, family and love that he and Sam hadn’t had until, well… now, really. To have that already, just starting out? Maybe these kids can help people without losing themselves in the process.

Dean’s train of thought is completely derailed when Mary continues, a bit too nonchalantly. “You know he took me to a gay bar once?”

Dean sputters. “Wh—what? He. He what?”

“Took me to a gay bar. They’re a lot different than they were in the ‘70’s.”

“You. What?” He has the absurd thought that he’s glad he gave Mary the knife work, because he absolutely would have chopped a finger off.

“Things were a lot different back then. You know, you couldn’t talk about that stuff. It was all secret, all hidden. If it got out you could be beaten, killed even, and no one would blink an eye.” She gives him a rueful smile. “I had some friends—your father, you know, he’d go out drinking with his buddies, sometimes wouldn’t even come home. So I figured nothing was stopping me doing the same. This was before you came around, of course. So my friends would drive us into the city, they knew all the secret places. You had to know someone, you know,

not like now when you can just… look it up on the computer, or hell walk past a sign on the front door.

“I thought… when I woke up, and it had been so long, I wondered if things had changed. And it seemed like they had, you know, marriage equality and all that, and I thought how wonderful that you and Sam grew up without all that hate. But. Talking to Max I realized that most of those changes only happened a few years ago, that no matter what the laws are it’s still dangerous. I guess I’d hoped that… more change would have happened while you were still kids, you know? Your father… he wasn’t very—open minded. I just wish I’d been there. I wish I’d had a chance to tell you boys that I’d love you no matter what. Because my guess is you didn’t have that.”

“No. No we—we didn’t.”

She looks at him for a long moment. “Look, Dean... I know we have a long way to go still, catching up on missed time, figuring out how to… be, with each other. But I just want you to know, now, since I couldn’t when it mattered—if there’s ever anything you want to talk about, anything you want to tell me, I just want you to be happy.”

“I’ll, um. Thanks. Thanks, Mom. I’ll keep that in mind. And hey… it still matters.”

She reaches across to squeeze his hand.

So maybe it wasn’t exactly “coming out,” not yet, but. Training wheels.

There’s a quick salt-and-burn a half day’s drive from the bunker, so Dean takes Jack with him to give him something to do. Jack loves going on roadtrips, and he’s a pretty good driving partner; like Cas, he’s willing to listen to Dean’s music on repeat without complaint, and he makes for interesting conversation but is also willing to maintain a comfortable silence and watch the world go by. Sometimes he’ll ask a question or make a comment that has Dean’s heart clenching with how much he reminds Dean of Cas, especially Cas early on before he’d really gotten the hang of living with humans.

They get into town in the afternoon, find the grave before dinner, and are finished by midnight. They stay over a night to clean up and rest, and with nothing pressing on the agenda Dean decides to take the kid

into town for breakfast instead of grabbing food for the road. Jack loves exploring new towns—window shopping, checking out the local parks and library—so Dean indulges him, letting him lead the way and texting Cas pictures surreptitiously.

They see the protesters first, standing on the sidewalk across from the blocked off Main Street. Jack slows down, his face scrunched up in confusion. Dean's stomach drops. Jack has seen a lot of horrible things in his short life, but this is one thing Dean wishes he could protect him from. Monsters he can explain; bigotry and hate are a different breed of evil.

The signs range from eye-roll worthy—"It's Great To Be Straight!"—to out-of-context bible verses, to downright vulgar. One says, "You're Going To Hell!" which is amusingly ironic.

"What are they doing?" Jack asks, all innocent bewilderment.

Dean clears his throat. "They're protesters. That's a pride festival, across the street. It's kind of a… celebration, I guess, of different types of people, different types of—of love. Here they can express themselves without judgement, with people who understand." He hopes that's a good explanation, at least. Everything he knows he learned from Charlie, always too self-conscious to investigate it himself.

Jack squints even harder, looking back and forth between the protesters and the colorful displays behind the roadblocks. "But that sounds wonderful. Why would people be angry?"

He sounds so young, Dean's eyes sting. "A lot of people were raised to think… that anyone different from them was dangerous. Something to be feared, to hate. People don't understand because they don't want to understand, because it's easier to hate than it is to learn." He pauses as he realizes. "You know, that's not so different from—from you. When we—in the beginning, you know, we were scared. I was scared. Because I didn't understand. I didn't want to know you because then it would… it would hurt more if something went wrong, if you were a threat. It was easier just to stoke the anger. That's… that's a hard pattern to break. Not everyone can do it. Not everyone tries."

"That was how… you were raised? To hate people who were different?"

"Yes. Yes we were. People—if you weren't family, you were a potential threat. Monsters, anyone not human, automatic threat. And

you didn't—there were things you didn't do. Things you weren't allowed to say or like or want. It fucked me up. I'll probably be untangling how much it fucked me up for the rest of my life. And I don't want—I don't ever want you to feel like that with us. Okay? Never again."

Jack shakes his head. "I don't feel like that, not any more. Not for a long time. I know you don't hate me. I'm still scared of me, sometimes, but I'm getting better. I know you were scared and hurting. I know you missed Cas and your mom."

"I did. But it was wrong to take that out on you, I know that. And I'm sorry, Jack. I don't know if I ever said that, but I am."

"I know. And thanks." He grins, all squinty eyed and open, and Dean's heart aches with how much he loves him.

Dean claps him on the shoulder and squeezes. "You're family, kid. You're stuck with us now."

Jack asks if they can walk around the festival for a while, and Dean only hesitates for a moment before telling him, "Of course we can. Lead the way, kiddo."

Jack bounces off to the first vendor table, immediately asking about all the different flags and color combinations with an enthusiasm that immediately spills over onto everyone around him. Dean takes a steadying breath before stepping through the gates to join him.

He can do this for Jack.

He can do this for himself.

He needs to tell Sam. He *wants* to tell Sam, even though it'll be hard, even though forcing the words from his body may be one of the biggest challenges of an extremely challenging life. He wants to. He just… doesn't know how.

When Sam asks what his plans are for Valentine's Day, he knows it's the perfect opportunity. The perfect opening. But he's not *ready* . He's not…

He'll never be ready. That's the point.

“I’m not… going out this year, Sam.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m not going out. I’m staying here. I don’t have plans.”

“But you—you never miss a Valentine’s Day. Unattached Drifter Christmas, or whatever, right? The only times you’ve missed it is when we were, like, fighting a literal apocalypse or possessed or something.”

Dean shrugs.

“Are you… okay?”

Dean rubs his temples. “I’m fine, I just—that’s not something I’m… interested in. Any more.”

“You’re not interested in… hookups.”

Dean sets his shoulders, forces himself to make eye contact. “When’s the last time I hooked up with a woman, Sam?”

Sam makes a face. “I don’t know, dude, I try not to pay attention. I’ve had to try *really hard* sometimes.”

“And recently? You been trying?”

“I guess, I…” His eyes unfocus a bit, clearly searching his memory. “When *was* the last time?”

“You remember the goat man? Black Bill, or whatever?”

“Oh right, that waitress you ditched me for. But that was like two years ago dude.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“What—wait, really?”

“Look, I don’t want to… make a big deal out of this, or whatever, but. I’m not gonna be hooking up with women any more. And I haven’t—a lot of the times I told you I was, I was, um. Lying.”

“Why?” Sam looks incredulous. Dean doesn’t blame him.

“Well, sometimes I just wanted to, I dunno, keep up appearances, I

guess. And sometimes I was with, um. I was with guys."

Sam blinks, leans back in his chair. "Oh."

"Yeah, *oh* ."

"That's… okay. So you're what. Bi, pan?" Trust Sam to know all the lingo.

Dean scratches at the back of his neck. It would be easy to just agree and move on, but if he's doing this he's doing it all the way "You know I, um. I thought so. For a long time. I tried, but. Yeah, no it's… it's pretty much just guys."

"Wow, okay. Well uh… look, this is a lot to uh, digest, I guess, but I'm —I'm really proud of you, man."

Dean rolls his eyes.

"No, stop it. I am. This can't have been easy—God, with Dad? Anyways um. It means a lot, that you told me. Do you—does anyone else know?"

"No. I never—well, Charlie knew, but. That's all."

"That's—that's good. That you had that." He pauses, wheels obviously turning. "So, um. Cas doesn't… know?"

"Not yet."

"You know he won't care, right?" Sam's eyebrows raise. "Actually, he might—"

"Sam. Don't. Wherever you're going with that… I can't, I can't go there yet."

"Okay, yeah, that's fair." He clears his throat. "Have you always known? That you... liked men?"

"Kinda, I guess. Yeah. Told myself I liked both, but. I didn't, not really." *Not like this.*

"Wow. That's—wow, Dean. I'm—I'm so happy for you and—and proud of you—" Dean rolls his eyes again, "—no, I know, that sounds… I don't want to be condescending here but. Look, I know how we grew up, right? This stuff was—we were both pretty fucked up. I remember what Dad was like. And it can't… I can't imagine how

hard that was for you. How hard it still is, so. I just. I'm so happy for you, man."

"Thanks Sammy." Sam is looking at him with his big sincere puppy eyes, and Dean needs to jet before he starts blubbering. "Don't go buying me any rainbow flags or anything, alright? I'm not there yet."

Sam huffs. "Yeah, okay."

It's a while before he works up the nerve to talk to Cas. Even with Sam knowing. Even with Mom being supportive, and sort of explaining things to Jack, and finally coming to terms with things himself. It's different with Cas. There are… implications.

Sam, to his credit, doesn't act any different. Dean had been slightly concerned that an overly supportive Sam would be suffocating, but Sam takes his role as Secret Keeper very seriously. There are no sly looks, no teasing comments, and if he does make himself slightly more scarce on Dean and Cas' movie nights, well… Dean's not going to draw attention to it if Sam doesn't.

He's coasting and he knows it. The status quo is *really good* for once in his life; it feels like tempting fate to try for something more. Pull out one too many Jenga pieces and this little family they've made for themselves could come crashing down. It feels selfish even now, after convincing himself that he can. That he should.

So he coasts.

Cas takes Jack to visit Jody and the girls while Sam and Dean take care of a few salt-and-burns. Cas leaves Jack at Jody's to help Claire and Kaia make quick work of a vamp nest, and by the time they're finally home Dean is off with Mary. So it goes that they miss each other by a day on three separate occasions, resulting in the longest period Dean and Cas have been separated since the Empty spit him out.

They talk on the phone almost every day—resulting in knowing looks or raised eyebrows from their hunting partners that Dean's not going to think too much about—and stay up texting on days they don't. A lot of the days they do both. Dean *misses* him, and it's a different kind of missing than he's had before. Cas isn't dead, he's not off doing angel shit, he's not pissed off at Dean and ignoring him, he's just *not*

here . Without all the pain and hurt and grief and worry that he's had in the past, the amount of ache he still feels with Cas gone is surprising. Maybe it shouldn't be. Maybe the *missing* itself was always the hardest part.

It's with this clarity that Dean calls ahead on his way back to the bunker and asks Cas to meet him outside. He's done waiting. He's done letting fear get in the way of who he wants to be.

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He picks Cas up outside the bunker without much explanation—doesn't really need it with Cas, anyway. Cas is always happy to just drive, or just sit, and seems to know instinctively when Dean needs some time to work up to conversation.

It being Kansas, they are surrounded by flat, flat fields on all sides. It's a clear night, and there are no cities near the bunker, barely even any towns. The stars are always breathtaking on nights like this, no matter how long he's lived here or how many times he's looked at them.

He pulls over into the dirt and parks, then gets out to lean against the hood, hands in his pockets to keep from fidgeting. He's always felt more comfortable with Baby at his back, holding him up, grounding him.

He hears the passenger door open and shut, and suddenly Cas is at his side. Shoulders brushing, they look out at the sky together for a long moment.

"Sam and I used to do this all the time. Just pull over and look. When he first started school at, you know, five or six or whatever, he started realizing that other kids didn't have lives like ours. They didn't live out of cars and dirty motels, didn't have to move every few months. They had homes, friends, stability, things he never had, things I barely remembered having.

"So I started pointing out constellations. Any time we were in a new place I'd show him that the stars are the same no matter where in the country you are. Didn't know all the names—North Star, Big Dipper, Orion the Hunter. I made up names for the others. The first clear night we spent in a new place we'd always go out and find the stars. They were our only constant, really. The stars and the car.

"I remember the first really clear night after he left for Stanford. Pulled off the road on some deserted desert road, got drunk as hell
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feelin' sorry for myself. That was one of the first times it really hit me that I'd never get out. I'd be chained to my dad til one of us died, and even if I outlived him... what else did I have? The stars and the car. All I had left."

He can feel Cas gearing up to say something—probably something much too earnest, something that'll flay him open too soon, before he gets out what he needs to. He clears his throat and pushes on.

"So you know that case I went on a few months back, down in Texas? Turns out an old buddy of mine owned the bar where the disappearance happened. Lee—his name was Lee. We were -" He stops, clears his throat again. There's a buzzing in his head, in his chest. He feels like he's floating, like he's falling, like he's watching himself from a distance. "Back when we were kids, y'know, twenty-two or something, Sam was in college, Dad was… off being Dad. Me 'n Lee spent a few months um. Together."

He crosses his arms over his chest as if to keep his racing heart from bursting out. He takes his eyes off the sky, stares down at his shoes. "Never told anyone this, not even Charlie. We were, um, it was just fun, you know. There wasn't any like commitment or anything but. Yeah. Anyway. So he owned this bar, and. I had to kill him. He was a monster, Cas. Except he wasn't. He was just a person who wanted to be happy, who thought he was owed happiness. So he justified it to himself, letting people die, killing people, because he thought he deserved it more than them."

Dean takes a shaky breath. Cas puts a steadying hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry you had to do that," Cas says quietly. "I can't imagine how hard that must have been." He doesn't say *you should have told us* , doesn't ask why Dean's telling him now. He just says he's sorry, and Dean loves him *so* much.

Dean nods, swipes at an eye with the heel of his hand. "He was the first person I really thought about like that, you know? Besides kid stuff. The first sort of relationship I had. Hell, probably the only one. He was the only person I've been with that I really saw a… a future with, I guess. It was stupid. He didn't want that, we never could have had that, not without dropping Dad for good. I couldn't—I wasn't ready to do that. But. Yeah. He was probably the only real relationship I had with someone I… someone I could have loved, like that."

Cas is quiet for a long moment, his hand still on Dean's shoulder. Dean

closes his eyes and focuses on the weight and warmth of Cas at his side, the hard cool metal at his back.

“What about Lisa?” Cas asks at last.

Dean smiles ruefully. “I loved Lisa, I did. She was there for me when… I don’t know what I would have done without her and Ben. But. It’s different, with women. It took me a long… *long* long time to see that. I don’t—I can’t—love them like that. That’s not who I am.

“I thought I was broken. I mean, I am, but not like that. I thought… thought if I tried hard enough, worked at it long enough, I could make the puzzle pieces fit together into the picture I wanted them to. But there were always pieces missing. I couldn't figure out why... so I kept mashing them together. Turns out I was working with a whole different puzzle to begin with. The pieces were never gonna fit, they weren't supposed to.

“Took me most of my life to realize that. Admit that. And when I did, I figured—well, that's that, then. I can never be what I thought I wanted. I can never have what I do want. So, I guess I'll just. Stop trying. Probably be dead soon anyway.

“But Lee, he thought… he decided that the only way to have what he wanted was to take it, steal it. Destroy other people's lives so he could have his own. And it… it got me thinking. How many people have died for me and my family. Does that make us monsters too? How many people do we have to save to be happy, to balance the scales?

He runs a hand down his face. “I'm tired, Cas. Tired of pushing aside what I want. Tired of fighting for other people's happiness, and thinking that their happiness means I can’t have any myself. And I realized… I don't believe that, you know? I don't think one person’s happiness can only come at the expense of someone else's. I don't think it's a zero sum game anymore. My happiness doesn't rely on someone else's misery. And if that’s true, then… what’s stopping me, you know? Just fear.”

“What are you afraid of?” Cas tilts his head, his expression open and earnest. There’s no judgement there, only care.

“Afraid I’m gonna fall on my face, I guess. My whole life I’ve never wanted anything. I couldn’t. And now… if I let myself—let myself want something, reach for something, what if—what if it’s not there? What if I figure out what makes me happy, but I can’t have it anyway?”

Cas is quiet for a moment, considering. “Well, I guess that depends on whether you need to have something, or if just… knowing, finally, is enough. Maybe finding happiness is more of a—a muscle you can exercise, rather than a switch you turn on and off.”

“I’m not sure I’m following.”

“Happiness is a foreign concept for angels. Like all human emotions, it’s not something we were built for. We’re not entirely emotionless, obviously, we’re not machines, but it’s muted, buried. The first time I felt joy—real, unfettered joy—was when I carried your soul out of Hell.”

He turns to look at Dean, and Dean’s breath catches in his throat. He’s beautiful in the starlight. He’s beautiful, always. Reflections of stars twinkle in his eyes, stars he may well be older than, and Dean… wants.

“It wasn’t a permanent state of being, of course. There have been too few opportunities for joy since we first met. But… something was planted inside me, that first moment, and it’s become easier to let myself find them. There is joy in teaching, in learning, in sharing a meal or a smile or a drive. In spending time with people I love. And when I don’t have those things, there can also be joy in remembering the times that I did.

“All of these things I didn’t know, didn’t understand for most of my existence, and many of them not until the last few years. So maybe… if you open yourself to it, you’ll find happiness is just there, waiting for you. A—a seed that just needs watering. ” He gives Dean a soft smile. “So I guess you should just ask yourself, what are your seeds? What makes you happy, now, and what can you grow from that?”

Dean looks up at the stars for a long moment. All the adrenaline that had hit his system has leveled out, and he’s left with a sense of peace. It’s an unfamiliar feeling. But Cas is right, there is peace in knowing. Maybe there can be peace in sharing it, too. “This. You. You know, this family we made—it’s more than I ever dreamed I could have. It’s better than anything I thought I wanted. Jack, you know, he’s a good kid. He’s a really good kid, and that’s because of you, Cas. You and Sam. I didn’t give him a chance at first, but you guys did, and now, god. Look at him. He’s… he’s *good* , Cas. And if this is… if it stays like this forever, you and me and Jack and Sam and Mom, just having you all here, having you safe? That’s enough for me. It is.

“I know… what I am. I’m loud and I’m angry and I’m annoying as fuck, I’m selfish and broken and honestly I don’t know why anyone sticks around at all, but. For some reason you do. You keep coming back, buddy, and this last time I really, really didn’t think you were going to. But you did. And I. I love every piece of our messed up little family, but. I think I know now that what makes me happy is… is you. Just you. You’re my constant now, Cas.

“And so… look, I’m not expecting anything from you, okay? And I—I know how you are, too. I’m not good at—at saying it, but I do, I know. You’re always trying to prove yourself, always trying to be useful, keep us out of danger, and we appreciate that, we do, but. We don’t need it. *I* don’t need it. I just need—I *want* you here. That’s all.”

Cas looks… he looks like he might cry, honestly. Dean’s hanging on by a thread himself. “Dean. I… want to be here, too. With you. There’s nowhere else I want to be but by your side, always. I just didn’t—I was never sure if that’s what you wanted. I didn’t think—”

“I do. I do, Cas, I want that.”

“When you said… you’re not expecting anything, because of who you think you are. I don’t see you that way. I never have. Dean, you care more for people, for your family and your friends and the world, than anyone I have ever known. You think too little of yourself. So tell me —all that aside, what is it you want that you’re not expecting to get?”

“I want—I want—” He is, at long last, out of words. And Cas is… Cas is looking at him like he hung all these stars by hand. He’s looking at him like—well, like he always looks at him. Dean just hadn’t ever let himself see it. So he does the only thing left to do—he kisses him.

It’s more of a question than anything, a soft press to show desire without demanding it in return. He pulls back to meet Cas’ eyes, which are widened not so much with shock as with wonder. In the next breath Cas is moving into him, his hand coming up to cradle Dean’s face, and he’s kissing Dean back, and *oh.* There it is. That swooping-falling-flying in his gut that had laid dormant for twenty years, the lightning under his skin sparking at every place they touch, every molecule of his being pulling *out* , out to meet, to touch, to be consumed.

They pause, resting their foreheads together and sharing breath. Dean’s hands have clenched on to the front of Cas’ coat, and Cas’ other hand is on his hip. “That,” Dean says, softly into the shared

space, “that’s what I want.”

The corners of Cas’ eyes wrinkle with a smile. “That’s all?”

Feeling giddy and not a little lightheaded, Dean laughs. “Well, I mean… if more’s on the table, then…”

Cas steps back, but leaves his hand on Dean’s shoulder where it always seems to fall, the place he left his mark years ago. Dean feels the ghost of a memory, a whisper of Grace still connecting them, the echoes of a creature of pure light and beauty cradling a ruined soul in it’s joy.

“Dean. I want this too. Whatever is… on your table.”

Dean tilts a smile at him. “Yeah?”

Cas nods and Dean leans in for a final, lingering kiss. “Hey Cas? Let’s go home.”

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They pull into Baby’s normal spot in the garage. Dean turns the engine off but doesn’t get out. His hands clench and unclench on the wheel,

and Cas just waits, sensing again that Dean's working up to something.

"I've, uh. I've never, um. Done this. Before?" At Cas's look, he hurries to explain. "No, I mean—yes, I've done *this* like, specifically, but not. It's never." He takes a breath, forces himself to look Cas in the eye. "It's never meant anything before. I want to do it, you know, proper. I don't want to just…" He bites his lip, running out of words. So he takes Cas' hand from where it's resting on the seat, squeezes gently and just says, "You ever been on a date, Cas?"

Cas' eyes crinkle up at the corners. "No, I've never had occasion."

"That's settled then. I'm gonna take you out on a real proper date, okay? The whole nine. We can drive into the city, or—or stay in town, there's that fancy little Italian place we've never tried."

"I'd like that."

"Tomorrow's Friday, what do you think? We can go out, have a nice dinner, then come back for our movie if you want. Or go to the theater, or—hell, do anything you want. I just think… we should have this, you know? If… if you want."

"I think... that sounds perfect."

He wants to tell Sam before too much time has passed—there's only so long they'll be able to sneak around, and he'd rather tell him than be found out. God forbid in a compromising position. But mostly he wants to tell him because Cas deserves to not feel like Dean's ashamed of him or hiding him, even if it has been less than 24 hours. Truthfully, Dean's a lot less nervous than he thought he'd be; he wants everyone to know, as soon as possible. He just doesn't want to have to… tell them.

He figures the best way to do it is in and out, put a time limit on it, an easy escape route. He knows Sam'll be supportive, it's just… he's gonna be *too* supportive. Best to do it on the way out the door, so Sam can process without Dean around, and they can just move on with their lives.

He sticks his head into the library where Sam's doing… Sam stuff. "Hey, Cas 'n I are going out, won't be back for a few hours." He raps a

knuckle on the doorframe then turns to leave, knowing Sam won't let him get away that easy.

"Out? Out where?"

Dean sighs and turns back. Sam hasn't even lifted his head up from his laptop yet. He sighs again, playing into it. "Lorenzo's."

This gets Sam's notice—he sits up, looking bemused. "Wha—Lorenzo's? What, you guys got a hot date or something?" As he says it, he clocks that Dean isn't wearing his usual open-button-down-over-a-black-t-shirt, but instead has on his nicest henley, the soft navy blue one he's only worn a few times and dark fitted jeans. He blinks, brow furrowed, processing.

"Yeah, actually, we do." Dean fiddles with his cuff, pushing down the impulse to start rolling it up. "I'm taking him out."

"Taking him… out."

"Yes."

"On a…" Sam looks like his brain is going to start leaking out his ears trying to navigate whether Dean is saying what it sounds like versus getting it wrong and having to deal with that fallout. Dean takes pity on him. A little.

"On a date, yeah. I'll sum up for you—me, Cas. Lorenzo's. Date. Alright, see you in a bit."

"W—wait!" Sam comes out from behind the table, banging his knee in the process. Dean stops in the doorway again, eyes rolled to the ceiling. It's mostly for show. They have to do this dance; if Dean just came right out and said it, Sam would be busting out the salt, silver, and holy water. There's a ritual to it.

"This is—you're—for real? You're not fucking with me?"

"No, dude. Look… it's new, okay? Like brand spanking, last night new. We're taking it slow, or whatever. We're just going out to dinner, you don't have to call CNN."

"Wow. That's—wow. Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. I'm, fuck I'm happy for you guys, I really—you're sure,

though? I mean, this is Cas. That's kind of… a big deal. For you. You know?"

Dean bristles a little. His first instinct is to brush Sam off. It's not a big deal, it's just one date, Jesus Sammy. But the thing of it is… he's right.

He looks up at Sam, who looks nervous but determined—he expects Dean to snark at him, but is going to push through regardless. Dean feels a swell of affection for him. Stubborn ass.

He puts his hands in his pockets to keep from fidgeting and shrugs. "You're right. It is a big deal. But Sam—this is a long time coming. It just took too damn long for us to get our heads out of our asses, but… it—it just fits, man, I dunno. I haven't wanted anyone else in years. Stopped even trying. It's just him." He smiles up at Sam—who is now looking a little teary, the big baby. "So yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. Never been more sure of anything, to tell you the truth."

"Well, damn. That's good enough for me—not that you need my blessing or anything, but."

Dean shrugs again. "S'nice to have it, though." Sam looks like he's physically holding himself back at this point, so Dean rolls his eyes good naturedly and opens his arms. "All right, come on then, hug it out so I can get the fuck out of here."

They hold on a little longer than usual, and if Dean gets a little teary when Sam says, "I'm so happy for you," well. It *is* a big deal, after all.

Dean's nervous, but not for the reasons you'd expect on a first date. There's an ease to being with Cas that even the newness of their redefined relationship can't erase. But for all of his working up to it, it's still nerve-wracking to walk into a nice restaurant as two men clearly on a date.

He knows the town pretty well at this point, and is on friendly terms with most of the local store owners and such. Going in, he was pretty sure any discrimination would come in the form of gossip and cold shoulders rather than confrontations, but that wasn't exactly comforting.

Turns out there's nothing to worry about this time, as their hostess

seats them in a quiet back corner, and their server has rainbow colored stars tattooed around their wrist like a bracelet. They share warm, knowing smiles without saying a word, and Dean feels, for the first time, what it's like to be *seen* as the same instead of other. Obviously they got lucky, and being out in public won't always be so easy or positive, but for tonight he'll take the win.

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They arrive back at the bunker to find it dark and unoccupied. There's a note on the war room table:

Went to meet Mom for a case. Took Jack. Back in a few days.

Enjoy the privacy! ;)

-Sam

Dean snorts. "Subtle, Sammy…"

He hadn't counted on this. He'd figured they'd come home, put in a movie, make out a little… or a lot... and if things led to other things then they'd cross that bridge when they got there.

But with Sam leaving them alone—pointedly—there are. Implications.

It's not that he's opposed to having sex with Cas— *quite* the opposite, truly—but oddly enough in all this lead up, and a whole day of it being a reality, he hadn't really… thought about it. Not recently at least. He'd been so focused on getting ready for the emotional aspect, had gone over and over all the conversations and confessions, but he didn't actually have a plan for what to do… after.

It's kind of terrifying.

Cas comes up behind him to read the note over his shoulder. He puts a hand on the small of Dean's back, under his jacket. The heat from the long breadth of his hand seeps through Dean's shirt and travels through his body, warming him from the inside. An intimate touch. He takes a steadying breath.

"Looks like we have the place to ourselves," he says, his voice coming out a little rougher than he'd like.

Cas hums in response, and Dean turns to face him, Cas' hand falling to
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his hip as he does so. His eyes are wide with nerves as they travel over Cas' face, and he knows he's blushing. Ridiculous. He's being ridiculous.

Cas' eyes are soft and sure. "I had a very nice time tonight."

"Y-yeah. Yeah, me too."

Cas looks at him a moment more, then leans in for a kiss. Dean melts into him, letting his thoughts be chased away by touch. It's slow, and deep, but not yet heated. Just exploring.

Cas pulls back, then runs his thumb across Dean's lips. Dean blinks a few times, brain coming back online, then huffs out a laugh. "Jesus, why am I so nervous?"

Cas tilts his head, "Do you want to stop?"

"No, no." He shakes his head, catching Cas' hand as it slides off his face, presses a kiss to his palm. It's the truth, he doesn't want to stop - maybe catch his breath a little, but not *stop* . Unless… "Uh—unless you want to?"

Cas smiles. "No… but I'm not in any rush. What's another few minutes, or days, after a decade? After millennia?" He tilts his head. "Why are you nervous?"

"I—I don't know what I'm doing."

"I thought we'd established that neither of us do."

"I know, but…"

Dean licks his lips, looks down at their hands. Lets the touch ground him. "I'm worried... I'm gonna fuck this up. Scared you're gonna leave and I can't—it's hard enough, every time it's harder, but if we do this and you leave? I can't, I just can't." It all comes spilling out now, the final fears and holdups that have lingered, that can only be exorcised by saying them. "And I know, I know how I am. I'm clingy and needy and I… I get angry and I say things, push people away. And I'm trying, I'm really trying to be better but. I don't know how to want something this much. This is out of my fucking wheelhouse, man."

He tries to take a steadying breath. "When you were gone, I was. It wasn't good. You can ask Sam but he doesn't even know all of it. If I lose you again I don't… know if I could come back from that. And

that's not fair to put on you, I know, but—"

"Dean. Sharing your fears is not a burden. Would you feel it unfair of me to tell you mine?"

"What? No, of course not. No."

"Then I'll tell you. I am scared of not being needed. Of being useless, or a burden. My whole existence I've been a—a tool, a soldier, and if I didn't have a goal then I didn't have a purpose. I think that's something we have in common."

Dean nods. Cas continues, "It's only been very recently that I've been learning to just… be. To be still. To have my only purpose be a friend, or a father, and that my presence is more needed than *what* I can do. You said… you don't know how to want something—I guess I don't know how to be wanted. We make quite the pair."

"We're both so fucking stupid."

Cas smiles. "Maybe so. But we're here now."

Dean nods a few times, then squeezes Cas' hand. "You wanna, uh. Go watch a movie?"

"I'd like that."

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In the morning, Dean drifts into consciousness slowly, which has been a rarity in his life. He's either up and moving quickly because the job (or his life) depends on it, or he's up and making coffee and grumbling at anyone who talks to him before his first cup, but either way he's *up* . Lazing around half-awake had never been an option in his life, so even with the bunker and the time and freedom to do so, his internal alarms are always yelling too loud to make it worth it.

Today, though. Today, for the first time in over a decade, there's a warm weight at his back, an arm across his waist, breath on the back of his neck. He floats in this comfort, this bone-deep knowledge of *safety* , for minutes, hours, centuries.

When he finally stirs, he feels Cas' arm tighten slightly around his waist. Dean slips his hand down and weaves their fingers together. Cas doesn't really sleep, still, but he dozes—he's said it's more like a deep daydream than sleep, but it's relaxing all the same.
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Dean rolls onto his back, pulling their hands up to rest over his heart. Cas is looking down at him in the dark—because it's always dark in the bunker, even after sunrise—and in the soft light coming under the door he can just make out the soft smile on Cas' face.

This is… everything. Absolutely everything. And he needs Cas to know it. It's easier, at least, in the dark, in the warm dreamland of their shared bed. "You know I love you, right?"

Cas smiles, wide enough it crinkles his nose. "No. But I'd hoped."

"Yeah?"

"Mm. I think I've loved you since before I had the capacity to recognize it. I had to learn what it was, along with everything else. But it's because of you that I even had the chance. It's because of you I learned any of it at all."

He looks up at Cas and thinks, for the first time, that maybe… he doesn't have to choose. Maybe he doesn't have to sacrifice everything he wants. Maybe he doesn't have to pretend. Maybe he can let himself want things, let himself have things. Maybe it's not a zero-sum game. Maybe the reason it didn't work with Lisa or Cassie wasn't because he's not cut out for that, maybe it was because he wasn't cut out for that *with them* , and because he tried to make it all or nothing. Maybe this patchwork family and the life they're building isn't the ideal cookie cutter life he thought he should want, but maybe it's *his* ideal. And maybe that's okay. Maybe that's more than okay.

That winter, Dean takes the whole family into the city to see the local production of The Nutcracker. Jack is absolutely delighted. Mary gets a bit teary. Sam reads up on the history of the ballet and the music and talks everyone's ear off while they wait for the show to start. And Cas holds Dean's hand through it all.

It's perfect.

End Notes

Thank you all so very, very much for reading. This is a very personal story for me, so I can't even truly express how much your support means to me.

I started working on this the first week of January, I can't quite believe we made it! I may add timestamps after the challenge is over, so subscribe if that's something you'd be interested in. <3

Remember to check out Scarlett's masterpost, and send her ALL the love!!!! https://scarlettmichkat.tumblr.com/post/668109020898410496

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!